INDEPENDENT INFORMATION FOR SMART CONSUMERS

choice

SEPTEMBER 2008 • CHOICE.COM.AU

Solar panels
Anthony and Louise saved 70% of their energy bill with solar panels on their roof.

AV receivers
Organise your sound and video through one box with an audiovisual receiver.

On test

+ 127–132 cm TVs
+ Washing machines
+ Blu-ray players
+ Vacuum cleaners
+ Air conditioners
+ Kitchen shears
+ Sandwich presses
+ Antiperspirant

Big TV, big price

Which big screen is best?

Save $800 on 'extras' health insurance

The whole truth about wholegrains

Drug companies — the *real* power behind your prescription

250 PRODUCTS RATED!

The CHOICE Dessert Wine Selection — picked by experts for your cellar from 38 stickies in our test

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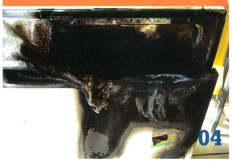

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SUBSCRIBERS' HELPLINE CALL 02 9577 3399 **EMAIL** ausconsumer@choice.com.au

How CHOICE helps you. CHOICE gives you the power to choose the very best goods and services, and avoid the worst. Because we pay full price for the products we test, we can remain 100% independent. We don't take advertising and we don't accept freebies from industry — our only aim is to give consumers the best possible information about buying products and services. Our income is only from subscriptions to our magazines and choice.com.au, and from other services we supply for the benefit of consumers. We're not a government body and we don't receive government funding.

We have laboratories in Marrickville, Sydney, that test everything from juicers to plasma TVs, coffee grinders to MP3 players and air conditioners. We test hundreds of products every year. There's no hidden agenda to our testing — we simply road-test products so that consumers like you don't get ripped off. CHOICE ratings are based on lab tests, expert assessments and consumer surveys.

CHOICE also has staff who research a wide range of consumer services — everything from the financial industry to the organic food business, supermarket practices to drug companies and pharmacies. They reveal the truth behind the facts and figures, and investigate the quality and the claims.

CHOICE has also always campaigned about consumer goods and services that affect your life. We lobby government and regulators on behalf of all consumers in Australia. CHOICE was established in 1959 and is a not-for-profit, non-party-political organisation.

CHOICE Best Buy

BEST BUY

CHOICE calls a product a Best Buy if it delivers high quality at a comparatively low price. Not every test report has Best Buys.

CHOICE Shopper

CHOICE SHOPPER BEST VALUE

Call 1300 360 655. All you need is the model name and number you want to buy, the price you want to beat, and your CHOICE subscriber number. CHOICE Shopper is available to personal subscribers only.

Subscribe to CHOICE

Personal subscription 1 year $82, 2 years $153.
Company/institution 1 year $132, 2 years $253.
For subscription and renewal enquiries only, call 1800 069 552

On test

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CHOICEextra.com.au

This is a free website for CHOICE magazine subscribers. It's an index of articles going back to Jan/Feb 2002, with links to PDFs so that you can read many of them immediately. You log in with your subscriber number, which is above your name on the mailing label that comes with the magazine.

Comment

GPs need independent drug information

When you visit a GP, you want to be confident you're prescribed the best treatment based on the best available evidence. But is this always what you get? On page 12, we look at one significant influence on doctors' decision-making — pharmaceutical company sales representatives.

Reps from these companies routinely visit doctors to provide information about drugs they manufacture. They're also there to convince the doctor to prescribe these drugs. This is a conflict of interest, because pharmaceutical sales reps don't provide independent information about the range of treatments available. The companies naturally want to make profits for their shareholders; promotion of drugs is intended to increase sales. If it didn't work they wouldn't do it.

CHOICE also looked at advertising in magazines for GPs and found that ads were mainly for newer drugs still under patent. Companies make more money from these drugs because a patent gives them exclusive rights to manufacture and sell them. Prices for patented drugs are often higher than for their generic counterparts.

These practices are bad for consumers. We want the best available treatment for the cheapest cost — not to be prescribed the most heavily promoted drug. We pay for drugs, both from our own pocket and through the Federal Government's Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme. Our money is wasted if we use drugs when other treatments would work, or use more expensive drugs when there's a cheaper one that works just as well.

Of course, doctors don't rely only on pharmaceutical ads and sales reps for information about drugs, but company-sponsored information greatly outweighs independent sources. CHOICE wants more suppliers of independent information for doctors. The National Prescribing Service currently runs a small program of independent information for GPs, including independent 'drug detailers' who visit GPs. This program should be expanded. It would be good for our health and could save money for us as both consumers and taxpayers. ■

Anny Friis
Editorial Director

THANK YOU

We'd like to say thank you to Mr and Mrs Almgren of Beecroft, NSW, who have again acknowledged CHOICE's work for consumers with a generous donation. CHOICE is a non-profit organisation funded solely by subscribers to the magazine and website, and sales of our other products. We're always very grateful for such extra support from subscribers.

HEALTH

Truth in pricing a win for consumers

CHOICE welcomes the Federal Government's announcement of mandatory unit pricing, a reform we've advocated for many years.

Supermarkets across the country will be required to implement unit pricing following recommendations outlined in the ACCC's recent grocery inquiry. This pricing system displays a product's cost per unit of measurement (for example, per kilogram or per litre). This appears on supermarket shelves alongside the normal ticketed price, allowing easy comparison across brands, regardless of product size.

CHOICE and others have long been campaigning for the introduction of unit pricing and we welcome this mandatory, nationally consistent unit pricing system. Already widely used in the US and Europe, it's expected to save shoppers time and money as food prices continue to climb and consumers seek out better-value brands.

Each of the major supermarkets has now indicated a willingness to adopt the new pricing system, though it's expected full implementation will take six to 12 months. The move will mainly apply to medium to large grocery chains, while small family-run retail stores can choose to display unit prices on a voluntary basis.

The details of the unit pricing scheme will be important and CHOICE is calling for comparisons to be made per kilogram and per litre (as opposed to per 100 g or per 100 mL) to make the price differences obvious.

Shoppers can already check grocery prices on the ACCC's new website, grocerychoice.gov.au. This site has nothing to do with CHOICE and we're not impressed with the name. ■

FINANCE

Is that bank safe?

A number of foreign-owned banks have come to our shores recently; some advertise the best and "safest" deposit rates on the market. Is a deposit with a foreign-owned bank as safe as an Aussie one?

The first thing to check is whether the bank is an authorised deposit-taking institution.

If the bank is properly licensed and regulated, then the answer is yes. The first thing to check with any bank, building society or credit union is that it's an authorised deposit-taking institution (ADI). ADIs are regulated by the Australian Prudential Regulation Authority (APRA), which enforces the safety standards that protect deposit holders. 'Foreign subsidiary' ADIs are regulated in the same way as Australian-owned ADIs and subject to the same checks and balances to protect depositors.

You might also like to check a bank's credit rating. Dutch-owned Rabobank, for example, which calls itself Australia's safest bank, has a AAA credit rating from international rating agencies Standard & Poor's (S&P), Moody's and Dominion Bond Rating Service. In S&P's judgment, Rabobank has an extremely strong capacity to meet its commitment to pay deposit account holders. S&P's ratings range from AAA (best) to D (used when a company is defaulting on its payments). The big four Australian banks have the next best AA rating, St George has an A+ rating, while Bank of Queensland is considered BBB+.

It's worth noting there's been criticism of credit ratings agencies recently over their evaluation of some risky types of investments. In May, Minister for Superannuation and Corporate Law, Nick Sherry, asked Treasury and the Australian Securities and Investments Commission to review the regulation of these agencies.

Regardless of credit ratings, the Banking Act says depositors should be paid before other creditors in the event of a bank collapsing. There can be delays in getting payment, though, a problem that will be addressed by a Financial Claims Scheme the government is set to establish. Under the scheme depositors will get repaid within weeks, up to a limit of $20,000.

To be sure that you're saving or investing with an ADI, check the list at www.apra.gov.au. ■

+ SAFETY

Fire risk from banned dishwashers

Several brands of Electrolux dishwashers have been banned from sale after being linked to a string of house fires.

A ban was recently issued in NSW on the sale of several Electrolux-made dishwashers, following reports of home fires linked to the faulty machines. The affected models have also been voluntarily withdrawn from sale across the country. The move follows three recalls by Electrolux since December 2007, when it was found that a wire connector can overheat and pose a fire risk. In NSW alone, 73 incidents were reported involving heat or fire damage to property.

If you think you might own one of the affected dishwashers, don't use it, and contact Electrolux immediately (see contact details below). About 27,000 affected dishwashers have been sold in Australia and New Zealand since April 2007, under the brands of Electrolux, Electrolux Dishlex and Westinghouse. Affected products have serial numbers ranging from 70700000 to 72400000; a full list of affected model numbers is on recalls.gov.au (search under 'Electrolux'). It's estimated that across Australia and New Zealand, at least 8000 dishwashers haven't been located by the recalls and inspected.

In the latest recall in March, consumers were urged to have their appliances checked again, because some dishwashers serviced in the earlier recalls had failed after the repairs. An Electrolux spokesperson said new instructions were issued to technicians prior to the third recall and the company was "confident that affected dishwashers serviced to these new instructions will not fail".

However, one Queensland consumer who had his dishwasher serviced after the third recall was shocked to find his kitchen on fire three months later.

Rodney Reed bought a Westinghouse dishwasher in October 2007. His machine was examined by a technician in January, and again in April, when a green sticker was placed inside the door to indicate the machine was safe to use.

"On 11 July my wife heard strange noises and saw smoke coming out of the dishwasher," Mr Reed told CHOICE. "She got the children out of the house and called the fire brigade. They told us, 'One more minute and the house would've been at flash point' — our house would have gone up in flames."

Electrolux regulatory affairs manager, Ian Forte, said most incidents reported recently relate to dishwashers serviced prior to 18 March. He said a green sticker on a product means it was checked after the third recall. "We'll have to investigate the circumstances of [Mr Reed's fire]. Obviously something went wrong in this instance," he said.

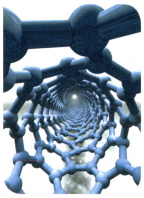
At the same time as the ban, Electrolux told us, "We are contacting all retailers in Australia, advising them of the NSW ban and the seriousness of the issue. We're also arranging for all stores throughout the country to be visited by our representatives to make sure that products are being recalled."

If you think you have one of the affected dishwashers, call Electrolux urgently on 13 13 49 or 1800 001 218 (toll-free) to arrange for repair free of charge. ■

+ HEALTH

Nanotubes: small technology — big risk?

There may be a very large downside to this century's 'miracle material'.



While it might have a big name, nanotechnology deals with the tiniest materials. Already in use in many everyday household products from sunscreen to dishwashers, nanotechnology has been lauded by many as creating a miracle material of the 21st century.

Nanotubes — carbon atoms rolled into a cylinder — are an innovation being developed for use in new drugs, energy-efficient batteries and high-tech sporting equipment. Described as the 'poster child' for nanotechnology, nanotubes are described as being as light as plastic and as strong as steel.

While the advantages of this super material are many, there have been concerns about the safety of nanotechnology. Recently, a major study published in the magazine *Nature Nanotechnology* suggests that inhaling certain types of nanotubes could lead to the formation of mesothelioma, a lung cancer usually associated with exposure to asbestos.

The study revealed that mice exposed to long, straight carbon nanotubes developed conditions that precede mesothelioma. However, the good news is that researchers didn't dismiss all nanotubes as potentially harmful, as the study found that while the long thin structures could be harmful if inhaled, the shorter and curlier nanotubes don't provide a health risk.

Ying Chen, Group Leader of Nanotube Research at the Australian National University, thinks this study highlights the need for further research across a wide range of nano materials. "This current research is like an alarm and a warning that we need to be careful. We need more research and proper regulations."

Dr Andrew Maynard of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, and a co-author of the research paper, says the study is a wake-up call for nanotechnology. "As a society, we cannot afford not to exploit this incredible material, but neither can we afford to get it wrong — as we did with asbestos." ■

IMAGE FROM LEFT: ISTOCKPHOTO/DANNY WYNNE, RODNEY REED, ISTOCKPHOTO

+ SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE COFFEE

Fair's fair

Our fast food giants have cottoned on to the value of the ethical and green coffee dollar … which is good news for the world's coffee-growing nations.

McDonald's, Gloria Jean's and Wild Bean Cafés are the latest coffee retailers to join forces with either the Rainforest Alliance or the Fairtrade Association in an effort to smarten up their green credentials and address their corporate social responsibility.

Coffee — a highly traded commodity — is grown in developing countries, mostly for people in developed countries to drink.

Coffee is one of the world's most traded commodities, grown in developing countries, mostly for people in developed countries to drink. It's this disparity that can create both social and environmental issues, and organisations that offer certification schemes believe that such schemes can raise the economic, social and environmental standards of coffee-growing communities.

Falling coffee prices, largely as a result of oversupply from intensive farming and reliance on agro-chemicals, can have devastating effects on these communities. Low prices, often less than the cost of production, have led to increases in poverty and unemployment. The pressure to raise output also places enormous pressure on the environment, with deforestation a real issue, as rainforests give way to coffee plantations.

The **Fairtrade Association** aims to encourage greater equity in international trade, and contributes to sustainable development by guaranteeing coffee producers a price for their coffee that's above the low market value, plus a premium for investment in community projects. It also requires certain environmental standards.

The **Rainforest Alliance** (RFA) is a not-for-profit organisation that collaborates with stakeholders to address and implement environmentally friendly and socially responsible standards, while ensuring the economic viability of farming. They don't pay a minimum price or prohibit the use of agro-chemicals, but require integrated pest management, the maintenance of shade cover and/or the restoration of native forests. To be certified, coffee must include a minimum of 33% RFA-certified beans, not 100%.

McDonald's McCafés and Gloria Jean's have joined forces with the Rainforest Alliance to use its certified coffee. All the coffee sold at McCafés (not regular McDonald's) is now made from RFA-certified beans, while 25 of the 31 blends in Gloria Jean's are RFA-certified. Wild Bean Café, found in BP service stations, will only be using coffee certified by the Fairtrade Association. Starbucks and Jamaica Blue each offer a Fairtrade-certified coffee.

So does it matter who you buy your coffee from, and who it's certified by? Regardless of which certification scheme is used, encouraging more coffee companies to engage in a certification program to source their beans is a positive step for the social and environmental standards of developing countries that rely on the coffee industry.

You can do your bit by choosing coffee that comes from a certified source, and if the café making your morning heartstarter isn't buying its beans from a certified source, ask why not and encourage them to find out more. ■

+ HYGIENE

Keyboards 'filthier than a toilet seat'

If you regularly forgo a lunch break to eat at your desk, you might want to change your routine.

Tests carried out by *Which?*, CHOICE's sister organisation in the UK, found bacteria on keyboards that could cause food poisoning symptoms such as diarrhoea and other stomach upsets. One keyboard had 150 times the recommended maximum of bacteria, making it five times filthier than a toilet seat that was swabbed for bacteria in the same test.

In addition to the testing, *Which?* asked more than 4000 members how often they clean their PC components. Forty-six per cent of respondents said they cleaned their keyboard less than once a month, including 11% saying they never cleaned it. Only 27% cleaned their monitor monthly and 20% admitted to never cleaning their mouse.

One cause of a bug-infested keyboard is eating lunch at your desk, as the food deposits encourage the growth of millions of bacteria. Poor personal hygiene, such as dodging the washbasin after going to the toilet, may also be to blame. ■

+ GREEN CLAIMS

Green beers spread roots

Some of Australia's big beer players are getting into the green claims arena — Lion Nathan with Barefoot Radler, Foster's Cascade Green, and Coopers. Do these claims carry weight?

The following companies are offering brews claimed to be environmentally superior:

- **Cascade Green** "100% carbon offset", "Beer of the earth".
- **Barefoot Radler** "Carbon neutral", "Treading softly on the planet".
- **Coopers** "Australia's greenest beer", "Big beer. Tiny footprint".

Cascade Green and Barefoot Radler both have carbon neutral certification from the Federal Government's Greenhouse Friendly scheme, which is recognised by the Australian Competition & Consumer Commission as credible and independent verification of carbon claims. The companies have purchased enough good-quality carbon offsets to deal with the pollution caused by the beer's 'lifecycle'.

This means that growing the ingredients, transporting them, brewing the beer, sourcing the packaging and transporting the finished product to the store have all been included in the carbon footprint. They even offset the carbon emissions caused by recycling the beer bottle when you've disposed of it. Both companies also say they've tried to reduce carbon emissions before offsetting the remainder.

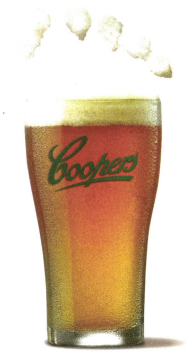
If you want to drink enviro beer, don't lap up a green claim unless it's backed up with reliable evidence.

For these companies, the decision was to add a new product with good green credentials to their existing range. By focusing efforts on just one product they can be specific in the claims. They also don't have to buy carbon offsets for their entire range — and what's to prevent consumers attributing the green marketing image to the Cascade brand, rather than just that type of beer?

Coopers, on the other hand, has taken the more challenging and ultimately environmentally responsible route of 'greening' the whole company. If Coopers meets world's best practice for water and energy use in producing beer, this could in fact be greener than the other beers that buy their way to greenness through carbon offsets. Admirably, Coopers generates its own electricity onsite, has water recycling facilities, and avoids additives and preservatives.

The trouble is, Coopers doesn't provide the reassurance of third-party certification, or support its claims with much evidence. When we asked, Coopers couldn't confirm what world's best practice is, nor could it provide comparable data on how it was performing in relation to other beer manufacturers in Australia. The company also told us it's just now in the process of measuring its footprint — months after we first spotted its footprint advert.

Where does this leave the consumer who wants to drink enviro beer? The marketing might be cute and clever, but don't lap up a green claim unless it's backed up with reliable evidence. ■



In brief

PayPal plans scrapped

eBay Australia has dropped its plans to make sellers use PayPal as the only electronic payment method. The move follows hundreds of complaints to the ACCC. eBay said the company has withdrawn from its proposed payment changes to "stop further confusion and disruption" among the eBay community.

Treadmills danger

A product safety audit conducted by the Office of Consumer and Business Affairs in SA found that 15 out of 18 treadmills tested posed a high risk of a child's finger getting caught while the treadmill is running. Nearly 70 injuries involving children and treadmills have been reported in SA and NSW in the past two years. Buy a machine with a safety key to prevent children from accidentally starting the machine.

Eli Lily fined $60,000

Pharmaceutical company Eli Lilly was ordered to pay a $60,000 fine for a media campaign that breached the industry code of conduct. The company was fined after CHOICE complained to industry body Medicines Australia (MA) about the promotion of Cialis Once-A-Day through newspapers and TV news. CHOICE says the fine, equivalent to fewer than 30 men buying the drug for 12 months, isn't a significant penalty. MA will review its code later this year.

IMAGE FROM LEFT: ISTOCKPHOTO (2); COOPERS

+ MORE THAN A MOBILE PHONE

First look at the iPhone 3G

Apple's long-awaited iPhone is now available in Australia from Optus, Vodafone, Virgin and Telstra.

APPLE iPhone 3G

Price Varies, depending on phone network and plan.
Contact www.apple.com.au

Beware: its ease of use could have you using its internet features regularly, which could lead to excess data costs.

The iPhone combines a cameraphone, video iPod, portable email and web browser in a sleek, thin, handheld package that's easy to learn and use. Its features include 3G phone network access, GPS capability and wireless connectivity.

Apple claims the 3G network access gives this new second-generation multimedia device twice the speed of the previous model (which wasn't officially released here). The iPhone 3G comes with other major upgrades, including GPS and so-called 'push' email, contacts and calendar — all of which mean you can have your messages, address book and appointment changes sent to your phone as soon as they're received, so you're always up-to-date.

It also steps beyond the bounds of a traditional mobile phone by allowing users to pick from hundreds of additional free or commercial programs from the built-in App Store software. The App Store's categories range from business, education, entertainment and finance to games, lifestyle, music, sports, travel and social networking (including Facebook, MySpace, and eBay).

The iPhone 3G is available in two versions — a black model with 8 gigabytes (GB) of storage and a choice of black or white models with 16 GB. It comes with built-in speakers and a fixed-lens 2 megapixel camera, which doesn't have a flash or video capability.

In-ear headphones with built-in microphone, AC adapter and USB cable for charging from either mains power or a computer are included. You also get a microfibre cloth — for cleaning fingermarks off the glossy surfaces — but no protective cover.

CHOICE VERDICT

The iPhone 3G brings Apple's famed style and ease of use to a mobile phone with the power of a handheld computer. Its cost varies greatly, depending on the phone network and plan you choose. Beware, though: its ease of use could have you using its internet features regularly, so choose your phone plan carefully to avoid unexpected excess data costs.

For the full story on the Apple iPhone 3G, see the Sept/Oct 2008 issue of CHOICE *Computer*. To subscribe, call 1800 069 552 toll-free or go to choice.com.au/magazines. ■

+ COURTYARD SWEEPER

Swept away

A quiet and efficient outdoor sweeper sounds perfect. Does it live up to expectations?

HAAGA Top Sweep55

Price $439 ($399 at home shows)
Weight 6 kg
Contact www.edoma.com.au

The HAAGA TopSweep55 is a manual outdoor sweeper claimed to work quickly, quietly and efficiently at picking up almost anything in its path: leaves, stones, paper, empty cans and fine dirt.

It has two circular brushes at the front that rotate inwards as you push the sweeper, which flicks dirt into a container behind the brushes. The brushes stick out from the sides, enabling it to pick up debris from edges and corners.

We tested it to see how well it picks up leaves, garden soil, sand and a mixture of all that with twigs, gumnuts and gravel in both dry and wet conditions. We manoeuvred the sweeper over even and uneven pavers and concrete and along the edge of a pathway that meets a wall.

It collects garden waste in both dry and wet conditions well, providing there's only a small amount of debris. Larger amounts require more effort as it pushes the dirt into a pile, which you need to go over numerous times before it's all picked up. But there are wider HAAGA sweepers available that may perform better.

Once the dirt receptacle is filled to the same level as the brushes (a fifth of the claimed capacity), it flicks the debris out the sides of the sweeper. It also leaves behind traces of soil in the centre of its path. On uneven surfaces and along edges its performance is OK, but it leaves some dirt in crevices.

The Top Sweep can be tricky when turning corners. You need to push down on the handle to lift up the front of the sweeper and turn in the direction you want to travel. But the handle can't be securely fixed, so our tester found it pushed down instead of the sweeper lifting. Emptying the container is easy, but you need to do it frequently because it deposits dirt back onto the ground before it's filled to capacity.

CHOICE VERDICT

At $439 it's an expensive glorified dustpan and broom, but a quiet alternative to a petrol blower/vac for large areas. ■

HOME ENTERTAINMENT

Blu-ray home theatre in a box

A new category has been born with the arrival of this Samsung — the Blu-ray home theatre system.

The SAMSUNG HT-BD2 is the first of a new category: the Blu-ray home theatre system. It's basically a Blu-ray (high-definition digital video) player with a built-in amplifier and a 7.1 surround sound speaker system.

Apart from a single HDMI (digital video and audio) socket for a digital TV and connections for the seven speakers and subwoofer, there are component connections for the best possible analogue video, or composite if you have an older TV. You only get two digital audio (Toslink) inputs for a PVR or Foxtel box and an analogue stereo connection for your iPod or other music player.

CHOICE tested it alongside the other Blu-ray players in this issue (see page 48). Its scores didn't match those in the *What to buy* list, but if you're interested in a Blu-ray home theatre system they were:

- Overall: 61%
- Ease of use: 58%
- Start-up and disc recognition: 65%
- DVD upscaling: 70%
- Damaged DVD playback: 33%
- Standby energy: 90%

When used with the HDMI connection, the HT-BD2 does a good job at upscaling DVD movies to 1080p resolution (that's 1080 lines on your TV screen), but it doesn't support all DVD regions and won't play video CDs. You might also find that dirty discs from the video rental store or your kids' DVD collection don't play well on this machine, as it didn't perform well in our damaged DVD test.

The bass response and channel separation performance is reasonable and the 7.1 speaker system delivered good performance when listening to movies. However, it could take you some time to adjust the system for your room during the initial setup, as there's no auto calibration for the speakers.

The latest Dolby TrueHD and DTS-HD Master Audio formats are supported, to deliver the best possible sound for Blu-ray movies. However, the SAMSUNG is geared more to watching movies rather than listening to music.

SAMSUNG HT-BD2

Price $1799
Contact www.samsung.com.au

CHOICE VERDICT

As with most 'all in one' solutions, the SAMSUNG HT-BD2 does several things adequately, but nothing exceptionally well. If you want to enjoy Blu-ray movies and need to save some space in your lounge room, it could pay to wait until more affordable models become available. ■

Coming

Air conditioners

With summer approaching, buying an air conditioner for the first time or replacing an old one is a major expense. CHOICE tested 10 large reverse-cycle air conditioners so you can choose the right model for the room you want to cool in summer and heat in winter.

Digital SLR cameras

When you want to be more creative with your photography, a digital SLR may be the answer. They're larger than compact and bridge cameras and give you more control, but you can still use them to point and shoot. Prices have dropped to make them more affordable, so we looked at 14 of the latest models and put them through their paces.

Ovens

Do you have to spend a lot of money to get an oven that cooks well? We put 10 ovens through eight cooking tests to find the models that cook and grill best, while still being easy to use and clean. We also give you a rundown on what functions you can expect to find in a 'multifunction' oven.

IMAGE BOTTOM RIGHT: CANON

Write or email — we want to hear from you.

Your experiences help our research and often let other readers know about scams and rip-offs. Positive outcomes you've had to a complaint you took to a manufacturer, retailer, importer or tradesperson interest us too. See opposite for how to contact us.

Selling secondhand strollers

I'm trying to find out about the changes in the laws for prams and strollers that were introduced on 1 July. I know the law applies to new prams, and seems to apply to secondhand 'suppliers', but what about private citizens who might want to sell a pram that doesn't have the new tether and red brake safety items? Any advice you have would be helpful.

Matt, via email

CHOICE says *From 1 July this year a mandatory standard was applied to strollers, which requires them to have a wrist tether strap (with a label warning the adult carer to use it), to help reduce the chance of a stroller rolling away. It also requires the brake pedals/levers to be red so they're easily seen (and more likely to be used).*

An individual can privately sell a secondhand stroller that doesn't have a tether or red brakes. However, the situation isn't entirely clear-cut. The Trade Practices Act (TPA) doesn't generally apply to private sales of goods by individuals, so mandatory safety standards also don't apply. But TPA requirements apply to individuals in some circumstances, such as interstate trade. State laws can also apply and these are being aligned with national regulations. In any case, only sell secondhand goods if you're sure they're safe to use.

It doesn't get much better...

... than this. My old vacuum cleaner gave up the ghost yesterday morning. CHOICE arrived in my letterbox yesterday afternoon with tests on vacuum cleaners. This morning I purchased your top recommended ELECTROLUX Oxygen+ model for $285 from the Good Guys in Rockhampton — they just happened to be having a half-price sale. So how good is that?

Peter, Queensland

Phones for the hearing-impaired

I would like to make a suggestion for future cordless phone tests with regard to their suitability for the hearing-impaired. Many phones can be used with the T-coil facility built into hearing aids but many deaf people, including me, find it unsatisfactory.

There are very few phones designed specifically for very deaf people. Uniden makes one model capable of very high volume, but it's not available with a combined answering machine, which is a significant disadvantage.

Many moderately impaired people prefer to use a 'normal' cordless phone, provided it has sufficient volume. Most cordless phones come with volume control, but the amount of sound available varies. Could CHOICE rate phones on how much volume is available at the loudest setting?

Another aspect that affects hearing-impaired people is the quality of sound from the answering machine. The phones I've tried may be clear but the message playback is not. Could you take this into consideration as well, please?

Peter McCutcheon

CHOICE says *Currently we include ringer loudness (maximum dB) in the publication table and state in the profiles whether the phones have the T-coil facility (in our latest test, only the UNIDEN DSS7955 did). We test and score for both speech quality and clarity for the phone, and message quality for outgoing and received messages for the answering machine, but unless they're particularly good or bad we won't comment on this due to space constraints. Our overall sound score incorporates these parameters, as well as background noise generated by the handset. In future tests we'll also publish talk volume in the publication table, as you requested, and will look into rating the volume and clarity of the answering machine.*

Thumbs up envy

I read with envy Gabriella Marenco's experience with her three-year-old Sony camera in *Thumbs up* March 2008. My three-year-old Olympus camera gave up the ghost early this year and I got a similar response from camera shop staff, who advised me to save my money on repairing the camera and buy a new one. I love my camera and to buy a replacement with similar features meant buying a bulkier SLR.

Camera repair centres quoted $80 just to diagnose the problem, so I contacted Olympus, which diagnosed the problem free. Unfortunately, it quoted $330 to repair it, unlike Gabriella who had hers repaired for nothing. I had it repaired but I will definitely consider a Sony rather than Olympus for my next camera.

Keep up the good work, CHOICE, I find the information and feedback in your magazine invaluable.

Harry, via email

CHOICE says *We contacted Olympus about the repair costs to Harry's camera and were told that his C5060 was a specialist model that's no longer sold by Olympus. It said it also offers free estimates, discounts on upgrades and so on, but when a like-for-like model is no longer sold it has no choice but to offer the repair. However, Olympus has offered to take the matter up personally with Harry.*

Extended warranty, friend or foe?

■ Have you ever done an article on the extended warranty industry? We seem to be offered these at the end of every appliance purchase these days. We've just been offered one for $120 (for three extra years) on a washing machine that has a two-year manufacturer's warranty. Even though the sales lady assured me that they make no money from the policy, we believe this to be untrue. Can you help?
John, Victoria

CHOICE says *Most products are pretty reliable and you already have statutory rights if something goes wrong. So CHOICE's opinion is that extended warranties are almost always a waste of money. There are three things to consider before purchasing an extended warranty:*

- *How reliable is the type of product generally, and the particular brand you're buying? You can consult CHOICE's reliability ratings for this.*
- *The extended warranty price vs a likely cost of repair or replacement. In five years' time, will you want a new model anyway? Probably not with a washing machine, but quite likely with electronic goods that change very fast.*
- *The existing manufacturer's warranty and your statutory rights — for example, under the Trade Practices Act.*

Look out for our in-depth report on extended warranties in an upcoming issue of CHOICE.

Thumbs up!

■ Linda would like to give her Thumbs up to Curtain Wonderland in Townsville. After washing the two-year-old curtains she'd purchased there, the sun blockout backing disintegrated. When she returned to the store, it offered to replace her curtains at no cost.

■ When Peter's Blanco front-loader washing machine 'stopped' within the warranty period, a serviceman found a 'doggie plastic bag' (from Peter's pockets) in the pump. He said it wasn't covered under warranty and a replacement pump had to be ordered from overseas. When it arrived, five weeks later, Blanco advised Peter it was free of charge.

■ Peter and Simone of Mildura want to offer a Thumbs up to Funtastic. After their stroller developed a fault, they returned it to Target, only to find that it no longer stocked that model and it had to be exchanged in Melbourne or Adelaide. They contacted Funtastic, explained their situation and three days later a brand-new 2008 model was delivered to them.

■ When Ray's RICOH camera broke, four months out of warranty, he wrote to the company to express his disappointment about its limited use. RICOH replaced the camera with the latest model.

Address your letters to ***Thumbs up!*** *at the address on the right.*

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Home and contents insurance

■ Motivated by the story in your April 2008 issue, I re-evaluated our home and contents insurance. I got quotes from a number of companies over the internet and found the information and rankings in your article were accurate and that there can be a wide discrepancy in prices for almost identical cover. In the end, I moved from CGU to GIO and the differences in cover were minor. However, one benefit of the GIO policy is that it covers my hearing aids in and out of the house, which CGU didn't. So I have a better policy with increased cover and a saving of $350 per year.

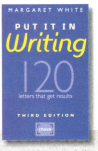
I then looked at my car insurance, which has been with Ozicare for more than five years. I got an internet quote from them, but added Accidental Hire Car Benefit. Expecting it to increase the cost, I was surprised it was 10% cheaper than my most recent invoice. I rang Ozicare, which conceded it was its mistake (its website had underquoted) but was happy to provide the cover at the lower premium. A better policy with a saving of $70 per year.

A combination of CHOICE, a few hours on the internet and phone and I've saved $420 per year with improved cover. Thanks for the accurate and timely information.
Martin Clifton

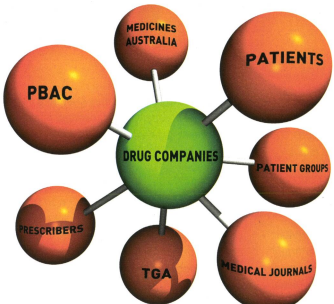
PHOTO COURTESY OF MARTIN

CHOICE says *Our insurance surveys show every time that there are large differences in premiums for policies with similar cover. Even if you're happy with your current home and contents insurance and don't want to shop around, it's a good idea to always check your renewal notice against the internet quote of your own company to make sure it's correct. If the internet quote is lower, ask if the company will match it. If it declines, you still have the option to take out the internet policy for the cheaper premium.*

To thank you for taking the time to write to us, CHOICE awards a prize of a CHOICE book to the 'Letter of the month'. This month's winner receives *Put it in Writing*, or any other book of his choice from the list on choice.com.au/books. We're sorry we don't have the resources to answer all your letters personally, and in the magazine we may edit them or print only an extract.



Email ausconsumer@choice.com.au or mail to:
Letters, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204



Promotion overdo$e

How much influence do drug companies have on the medication your doctor prescribes for you? CHOICE asked 180 GPs.

nutshell

- GPs are bombarded with promotions from drug companies. This influences their prescribing, and isn't in the best interest of consumers.
- CHOICE's survey found that GPs receive far more information from drug companies than from independent sources. The government needs to increase funding to give GPs better access to objective information.
- Pharmaceutical promotion isn't effectively controlled by the industry-administered Code of Conduct.

You're sick, so you go to see your GP, who prescribes you the best medication for your condition. You take it and you get better. That's how things *should* work, but what goes on behind the scenes? Can you trust you're being prescribed medicines based on the best independent information available? Our research shows that drug companies have a major influence on prescribing, and there's strong evidence that pharmaceutical promotion isn't in the best interest of consumers.

Doctors are the key targets of pharmaceutical marketing in Australia, because direct-to-consumer advertising is prohibited and because doctors have the power to prescribe drugs. So CHOICE sent a survey to 180 GPs, asking them about the extent of industry influence in Australia today.

Pharmaceuticals are big business. Drug companies in Australia had a turnover of $18 billion in 2006–07. Developing new drugs and conducting the various clinical trials required before they can be brought to market is expensive, so there's clear incentive for drug companies to market their drugs aggressively.

A company holds a patent over a medicine for up to 25 years before generic versions of the same drug can be manufactured by other producers and offered to consumers at a lower price. So it's in the company's interest to generate the highest possible return from its product before the patent expires.

Little information is publicly available on the actual amount drug companies spend on marketing drugs, but some estimates suggest it's more than they spend on research and development. Pharmaceutical marketing, like all marketing, is used to stimulate demand and increase the bottom line, and if it didn't work, they wouldn't do it. But because the information provided isn't independent it can lead to inappropriate prescribing practices, which expose consumers to unnecessary risk (see *GP contact with drug companies*, page 14). It can also increase the cost of the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS), which is funded by taxpayers.

GP prescribing

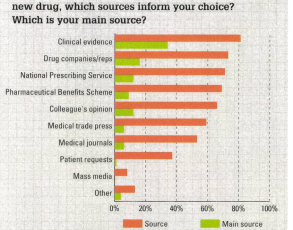
Our survey showed GPs use a range of sources to inform their decision about whether or not to prescribe a new drug, including their colleagues' opinion, medical trade press such as *Australian Doctor* and *Medical Observer* and the government-funded National Prescribing Service (NPS), an independent non-profit organisation for quality use of medicines.

According to our survey, the most commonly used information source is clinical evidence, but it's closely followed by drug companies or their reps — 73% of GPs surveyed use them as a source of information. And they're the main source of information for 16% of GPs when they're deciding whether or not to prescribe a new drug. See *GP information sources*, below.

Given that the pharmaceutical industry reaches GPs through multiple avenues, including representatives, direct mail, drug launch meetings, conferences, advertisements in journals and prescribing software, it's not surprising that as an information source it's top of mind. >

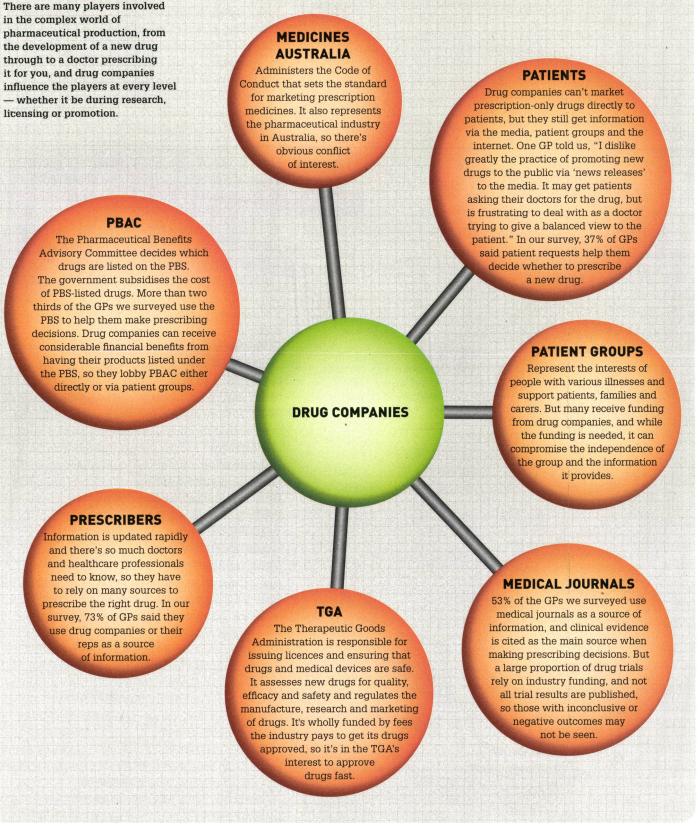
GP information sources

Q. When deciding whether or not to prescribe a new drug, which sources inform your choice? Which is your main source?



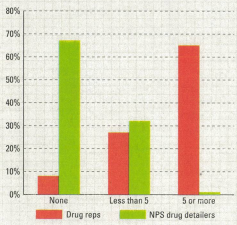
Under the influence

There are many players involved in the complex world of pharmaceutical production, from the development of a new drug through to a doctor prescribing it for you, and drug companies influence the players at every level — whether it be during research, licensing or promotion.


MEDICINES AUSTRALIA
Administers the Code of Conduct that sets the standard for marketing prescription medicines. It also represents the pharmaceutical industry in Australia, so there's obvious conflict of interest.
PATIENTS
Drug companies can't market prescription-only drugs directly to patients, but they still get information via the media, patient groups and the internet. One GP told us, "I dislike greatly the practice of promoting new drugs to the public via 'news releases' to the media. It may get patients asking their doctors for the drug, but is frustrating to deal with as a doctor trying to give a balanced view to the patient." In our survey, 37% of GPs said patient requests help them decide whether to prescribe a new drug.
PBAC
The Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee decides which drugs are listed on the PBS. The government subsidises the cost of PBS-listed drugs. More than two thirds of the GPs we surveyed use the PBS to help them make prescribing decisions. Drug companies can receive considerable financial benefits from having their products listed under the PBS, so they lobby PBAC either directly or via patient groups.
DRUG COMPANIES
PATIENT GROUPS
Represent the interests of people with various illnesses and support patients, families and carers. But many receive funding from drug companies, and while the funding is needed, it can compromise the independence of the group and the information it provides.
PRESCRIBERS
Information is updated rapidly and there's so much doctors and healthcare professionals need to know, so they have to rely on many sources to prescribe the right drug. In our survey, 73% of GPs said they use drug companies or their reps as a source of information.
TGA
The Therapeutic Goods Administration is responsible for issuing licences and ensuring that drugs and medical devices are safe. It assesses new drugs for quality, efficacy and safety and regulates the manufacture, research and marketing of drugs. It's wholly funded by fees the industry pays to get its drugs approved, so it's in the TGA's interest to approve drugs fast.
MEDICAL JOURNALS
53% of the GPs we surveyed use medical journals as a source of information, and clinical evidence is cited as the main source when making prescribing decisions. But a large proportion of drug trials rely on industry funding, and not all trial results are published, so those with inconclusive or negative outcomes may not be seen.

Frequency of visits to GPs

Q. How many drug company representatives or NPS drug detailers, if any, do you see in an average month?



A mountain of promotion in just one month...

We asked a GP with a practice in Sydney's northern suburbs to record all contact he had with the drug industry during April this year. He received 11 direct visits from drug reps, 17 promotional drug brochures, six drug samples, five product information leaflets, three invitations to functions, three invitations to visit drug company websites, one patient information booklet, one consumer medicine information leaflet, one branded pen, one magnet, one mouse pad and one notepad, among other bits and pieces. In total he was contacted by 18 different drug companies about 33 different drugs.

"Normally a lot of this stuff is filtered into the bin, but this exercise was surprising — by collecting it over a month it was really interesting to see just how much we get," he said.

While he doesn't always refer to the promotions provided, he'd rather receive the information than get nothing at all, and doesn't think it influences his prescribing. "I think most doctors are savvy enough to realise the drug companies need to market their products. I wouldn't prescribe a drug if it didn't benefit my patients or I felt it was inappropriate."

< GP contact with drug companies

We asked our survey participants — all practising GPs — about their contact with drug companies: **Seven visits a month from drug reps**, on average: 65% of GPs saw more than one drug rep a week, and 34% saw 10 or more reps in an average month — that's at least two drug reps a week. Three per cent of those surveyed said they see 20 or more reps in one month.

The NPS provides independent information to doctors, including a small program of educational visiting by NPS drug detailers (the independent equivalent of drug company reps). But only half the GPs we surveyed knew of this service. And while 67% of those GPs saw NPS drug detailers, drug company reps visited significantly more often, as *Frequency of visits*, left, illustrates.

10 promotional mailings a week from drug companies, on average: 62% of the GPs surveyed receive 10 or more promotional mailings a week, ranging from two to four mailings every day. *A mountain of promotion in just one month*, left, shows the sheer volume one GP received.

40% of GPs were sponsored by a drug company to attend a conference, seminar or training in Australia — and 3% overseas — in the last 12 months.

Contact with pharmaceutical companies is known to influence GP prescribing of new drugs, not always beneficially for patients. A UK survey of 1097 GPs found those reporting weekly contact with drug reps were more likely than those with less frequent contact to prescribe drugs without checking for published clinical evidence of effectiveness. Another study of 1019 GPs from the Netherlands found that more frequent visits from drug reps were associated with a lower quality of prescribing. Correctly prescribed, medicines provide enormous benefits. Used inappropriately, they can cause significant harm.

Code in practice

Medicines Australia — the body representing the pharmaceutical industry in Australia — administers the Code of Conduct that sets the standard for the ethical marketing and promotion of medicines. The code sets out rules on pharmaceutical promotion in all forms, including the promotional material produced by drug companies (ads in electronic prescribing software packages, mailings, gifts and offers, for example), drug company reps, sponsorship (of patient groups, for example) and drug company involvement in educational events for healthcare professionals.

But our research found that one in eight GPs weren't aware of the code. And compared with its UK equivalent, the code itself leaves a lot to be desired.

According to the UK's code of practice, a rep shouldn't visit the same GP more than three times a year.

And with many companies promoting products, even this can add up. But Medicines Australia's Code of Conduct is less specific. It simply says, "Company representatives should ensure that the frequency, timing and duration of appointments, together with the manner in which they are made, are such as not to cause inconvenience to the healthcare professional."

The UK code of practice also limits the number of mailings companies can send GPs about new drugs within six months of the drug's launch, and within a year. The Australian code covers the content of direct mail, but not the quantity.

Medicines Australia recently announced it was setting a "world-first in transparency" by publishing the details of medical education events held or sponsored by its member companies. In just six months last year, drug companies spent more than $30 million on over 14,500 events for doctors and other healthcare professionals.

Under the provisions of the code, lavish meals are banned and meetings "must be held in venues suitable for the attainment of the primary objective of enhancing medical knowledge". But reports reveal that some drug companies are spending $100-plus a head wining and dining (and educating) GPs in swanky restaurants such as Jacques Reymond in Prahran, Stefano's in Mildura, The Manse in North Adelaide and The Argo in South Yarra. There's also concern about the independence of industry-sponsored seminars and the information doctors receive.

Companies found to have breached the code face sanctions such as a fine (up to $200,000) or the printing of a correction letter. Of the 20 complaints received and finalised in 2006/2007, 16 were fined to the tune of $695,000 — that's an average of just over $43,000 per fine.

CHOICE thinks the Code of Conduct is ineffective, and Australia's top consumer protection agency, the ACCC, shares our concerns. When it approved the current version of the code, Chairman Graeme Samuel said, "It is unclear how effective [the code] is in actually regulating drug companies' conduct."

GP opinion on drug promotion

We asked our survey participants what they thought about the impact of their contact with drug companies:

"It's a good thing that drug companies provide promotional materials and visits about new drugs."

✔ 86% agree.

✘ 4% disagree.

"I'd rather receive information from drug companies about new drugs in a marketing or promotional format than not receive it at all."

✔ 81% agree.

✘ 6% disagree.

"I often feel pressured by drug company representatives into meeting with them."

✔ 35% agree.

✘ 41% disagree.

"There aren't enough sources of independent information on new drugs."

✔ 60% agree.

✘ 19% disagree.

"I trust the information I receive from drug companies just as much as independent sources."

✔ 24% agree.

✘ 55% disagree.

The survey results indicate that GPs are in favour of drug rep visits because they provide them with up-to-date information in a convenient way. As one GP told us: "[Drug company marketing is] often the only way you get information about new drugs in a timely fashion."

They're aware that drug companies are largely profit-driven and not without bias: "[Drug companies] play an important role — including awareness, displaying evidence, etc. They're probably not displaying the evidence without a bias but we as clinicians know and expect that."

But the reality is GPs receive far more information from drug companies than from independent sources. "[Drug companies] really seem to be the only ones who get out there and do it. More NPS attention would be wonderful!" said one GP. ■

A large proportion of drug trials rely on industry funding, and not all trial results are published, particularly if they have inconclusive or negative findings.

PUSHING PILLS

As well as conducting the survey of GPs, CHOICE examined advertising in medical trade press over a 12-month period, looking in detail at drugs used to treat high blood pressure. We found that promotion focused on medicines that are newer and more expensive but not necessarily more effective. Medicines that are out of patent are rarely promoted, even where their use is considered best practice. These findings demonstrate some of the biases that make pharmaceutical advertising a suspect source of information for doctors.

For a copy of this report go to choice.com.au/files/f133143.pdf.

CHOICE verdict

Our survey shows that pharmaceutical promotion is abundant, while objective, evidence-based information from independent organisations is underutilised in informing prescribing decisions. We want the government to invest more money in the NPS independent drug detailing services and other activities to promote the quality use of medicine.

In addition, CHOICE thinks the Medicines Australia Code of Conduct is ineffective. It needs to provide sufficient penalties to deter breaches, and there needs to be more effective monitoring and enforcement. Ultimately it should be administered by a body that's independent of the pharmaceutical industry.

A grain of truth

You hear it all the time — eat more wholegrains. And then there are all the new 'supergrains' being marketed — why should we eat them, and which ones? There are five good reasons to include wholegrains in your diet.

nutshell

- Wholegrains contain plant chemicals that can reduce your health risks. Eat at least two serves each day.
- 'Wholegrain' on a label doesn't always mean it's all wholegrain.
- So-called supergrains are wholegrains, but not necessarily much more super than more common ones.

Wholegrains are hot. They're not just an ingredient, they've become a marketing tool food companies use to convince us to buy one product over another. They're also all the rage among doctors, dietitians and other health professionals, whose message is "eat more wholegrains" — and there are good reasons why you should.

What do wholegrains do?

Wholegrains are high in many phytochemicals (plant substances), which have been shown to protect us from a wide range of health problems. They contain not just antioxidants, but such things as:

- **Sterols, saponins, squalene, oryzanol and tocotrienols**, which can reduce cholesterol levels.
- **Lignans**, which lower the risk of heart disease, and may have anti-cancer effects.
- **Phytates**, which may affect how quickly starch is digested and reduce the GI of food.
- **Vitamins and minerals** such as magnesium and potassium.
- **Soluble fibre** Numerous studies support the idea that foods rich in soluble fibre — such as the wholegrains oats and barley — can lower cholesterol.

Wholegrains can also improve insulin levels and blood sugar control, which not only helps with diabetes but also heart disease.

Five very good reasons to eat wholegrains

1. **Heart health** Large studies have found that eating plenty of wholegrains reduces the risk of heart disease and stroke.
2. **Reduce your cancer risk** There's evidence that eating wholegrains reduces the risk of some cancers, particularly of the digestive tract, but possibly breast and prostate cancer as well.
3. **Reduce your risk of type 2 diabetes** Wholegrains can improve blood sugar and insulin levels. Studies have shown a link between cereal fibre, which is highest in wholegrains, and a reduced chance of developing type 2 diabetes.
4. **Better weight control** There's evidence that wholegrains can help people control their weight and (as long as they keep eating them) reduce the risk of gaining weight in later life.
5. **Digestive health** The insoluble fibre in wholegrains is essential to keep things moving in the bowel — which means less constipation and risk of diverticular disease.

What is a wholegrain?

Wholegrains are cereals in which all the natural grain, including the outer bran layer, germ and endosperm layers (see *Anatomy of a wholegrain*, page 19), are retained. The most commonly eaten grains, white flour and white rice, have had these healthy components removed in the refining process. Common wholegrains are:

- **Whole wheat**, including wholemeal.
- **Brown rice**.
- **Corn** (even popcorn).
- **Oats**, which mean porridge and muesli to most of us.

In a consumer survey, most people knew wholegrains were good for them and many said bread and breakfast cereals were good sources of wholegrain. However, many people also thought rice, muesli bars and pasta were common sources of wholegrains, whereas in fact many are not. Only brown rice and wholegrain pasta would fit the bill, plus muesli-type snack bars that contain a majority of refined grains.

How much is plenty?

The Australian dietary guidelines say we should eat 'plenty' of bread and cereals, preferably wholegrain. Aim for at least four serves of grain-based foods a day — even as many as nine or 12, depending on your age, sex and activity. A serve is two slices of bread, or a cup of cooked rice/pasta/porridge, or 1½ cups of breakfast cereal, for example.

Health proponents say you should aim to eat half your intake of bread and cereals as wholegrain, which means at least two serves each day.

Experts from the cereal-industry-based group Go Grains Health and Nutrition have developed a program to help us eat enough cereal foods and enough wholegrains. The group has members right through the food chain, from growers to cereal food manufacturers.

The 4+ serves a day program educates us how to include four or more serves of grain-based foods each day. It's also set a target of at least 48 g of wholegrains a day, based on the scientific evidence. Manufacturers are encouraged to label their foods with statements such as, "Aim for 48 g or more of wholegrains each day. One serving (x g) of this product contains y g of wholegrains."

WHOLEMEAL = WHOLEGRAIN

In a recent change to the food regulations, 'wholegrain' can now include ground-up grains, which is the same as wholemeal. Previously, wholegrain meant whole, unbroken grains only.

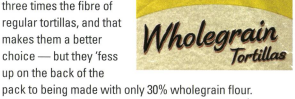
The whole truth

Wholegrain is the latest labelling buzzword. Claims have exploded on products such as bread, cereals, crackers, biscuits and pasta. But are all wholegrain foods created equal? Is there a difference between 'with wholegrain' and just plain old 'wholegrain'? You could be getting 100% wholegrain goodness, or a whole lot less.

"With wholegrain goodness"

…but how much? These "100% natural grain snacks with wholegrain goodness" combine "100% natural wholegrain goodness with delicious tastes".

If you think that suggests all the grain in there is wholegrain, think again. They're 41% wholegrain flour, plus regular flour, cornflour and other ingredients.


ingredients
Wholegrain Wheat Flour (41%), Wheat Flour, Cornflour, Linseed, Vegetable Oil, Milk Solids, Sugar, Salt, Malt Extract (From Barley), Soy Lecithin.
MAY CONTAIN TRACES OF EGG, NUT AND SESAME.

"Source of wholegrain"

These wholegrain tortillas do contain some wholegrains and three times the fibre of regular tortillas, and that makes them a better choice — but they 'fess up on the back of the pack to being made with only 30% wholegrain flour.

INGREDIENTS: FLOUR (WHOLEGRAIN WHEAT FLOUR 30%, WHEAT FLOUR), WATER, HUMECTANT (422), VEGETABLE OIL, SALT, EMULSIFIERS [471, 472 (e), 481], RAISING AGENTS (450, 500, 541), DEXTROSE, PRESERVATIVES (282, 202), COLOUR (171), FOOD ACID (297), FLOUR TREATMENT AGENT (223), ANTIOXIDANTS (306, 304).

"Wholegrain"

The main difference between Latina Ricotta & Spinach Agnolotti and Latina Wholegrain Ricotta & Spinach Ravioli is the fine-print admission that the wholegrain version has 17% (wholemeal) rye flour. Durum semolina is the largest ingredient in both products. >

Many people think rice, pasta and muesli bars are all good sources of whole grains, but in fact only brown rice, wholegrain pasta and some muesli bars fit the bill.

< "Wholegrain" — this one's 100%

Wholegrain spaghetti that contains only wholemeal flour: 100%. No ifs or buts for San Remo — if only all manufacturers could be this clear.

"Wholemeal" — well, sort of

These Premium wholemeal crispbreads from Kraft contain more regular wheat flour than wholemeal wheat flour — just check the ingredients list.

INGREDIENTS: WHEAT FLOUR, WHOLEMEAL WHEAT FLOUR, VEGETABLE OIL (CONTAINS ANTIOXIDANT [319]), INVERT SYRUP, SALT, MALTED BARLEY FLOUR, RAISING AGENT (500), YEAST, EMULSIFIER (SOY LECITHIN), FLAVOUR, COLOUR (150d), ANTIOXIDANT (308).

Whole grains aren't just ingredients, they've become a marketing tool.

"Wholegrain 54% from wheat and rice"

Congratulations to Kellogg's for going with absolute clarity in the large print. The new Kellogg's Corn Flakes Wholegrain clearly spells out it's made from 54% wholegrains. No guessing or need for fine print here.

"Wholegrain cereals"

Nestlé is more coy than Kellogg's — its Milo cereal has "more wholegrain", while Cheerios has the "wholesome taste of four wholegrains". But to figure out how much wholegrain you're getting in "Nestlé wholegrain cereals" you need to read the fine print. Cheerios has 59.4%, but Milo is only 32.5%.

"With wholegrain pasta"

This soup contains 11% wholegrain pasta. The pasta also contains some regular flour — how much is anyone's guess. While a bowl of this Country Ladle Hearty Vegetable Soup with wholegrain pasta will contribute some wholegrain to your diet, a bowl of Campbell's regular Farmhouse Vegetable Soup in fact contains more fibre (4.2 g compared with 2.8 g per serve), simply because it contains more vegetables. Swings and roundabouts.

Vegetables (48%) (Tomato Puree, Pumpkins, Celery, Carrots, Onions, Tomatoes, Potatoes, Peas, Corn, Pinto Beans, Green Beans, Spinach, Leeks, Parsnips), Water, Wholegrain Pasta (11%) (Whole Wheat Flour, Wheat Flour, Egg Whites, Vitamins (Niacin, Thiamin, Riboflavin, Folate), Mineral (Iron)), Vegetable Protein Extract (Contains Soy), Salt, Sugar, Yeast Extract (Contains Barley), Thickener (Guar Gum), Herbs, Garlic, Flavour Enhancer (E635), Spices, Mineral Salt (E509).

CONTRADICTORY DEFINITIONS

The Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) food regulations' definitions of wholegrain and wholemeal are clear (see *Wholemeal = wholegrain*, page 17). The definition is of the cereal itself and can be used for ingredients such as wholegrain/wholemeal flour. However, there's no definition of how much wholegrain ingredient a mixed food must contain to be described as 'wholegrain'. And that leaves things open to interpretation.

- FSANZ says that to promote a product as exclusively 'wholegrain', when it contains ingredients that don't use the whole of the grain, could breach the Food Standards Code and fair trading law in relation to misleading and deceptive conduct.
- FSANZ is developing a new standard that includes provisions on wholegrain claims. It's proposed that a serve of a product only needs to contain 10% of the amount of wholegrains that the manufacturer deems is beneficial to health, in order to make a claim about the presence of wholegrain.
- The industry-based group, Go Grains Health and Nutrition, encourages manufacturers to use wholegrain claims only on foods that have at least 10% wholegrain content, or at least 4.8 g wholegrains per serve — though it encourages manufacturers also to say exactly how many grams of wholegrains a serve contains and how this relates to a daily target.

Confused? That's not surprising. We found a whole range of different approaches to wholegrain labelling and claims on foods — see *The whole truth*, pages 17–18. In the end, a judge would probably need to decide what a shopper might think the claims mean, and whether they were likely to be misled.

CHOICE thinks the proposed FSANZ regulation of wholegrain claims certainly could mislead consumers about the wholegrain content of foods, and that it doesn't go nearly far enough. We think consumers would expect a product carrying a wholegrain claim to be substantially made from wholegrain ingredients. In addition, we'd like to see factual '% wholegrain' claims that tell consumers exactly how much wholegrain is in a food.

In the meantime, all you can do is check the labels — if there's a claim about wholegrain, it should tell you the percentage in the ingredients list.

Supergrains: the search for the holy grain

All the unusual grains that are sometimes touted as 'supergrains' can make a claim to interesting origins: some are marketed as 'ancient grains', with us since biblical times, or secrets of the Aztecs, Incas or Egyptians. But are they really special?

Most have some aspect that sets them apart — at least to those charged with marketing them. Some are gluten-free or suitable for people with allergies to wheat, or there may be a nutritional aspect, such as a higher fibre level or better fat profile.

Two of them (quinoa and amaranth) have more complete protein than other grains, which is important in countries where there are few other protein sources and grain forms the main part of the diet. In Australia, however, this would be important for very strict vegetarians (vegans), but for most of us it's of no real nutritional importance as our diets are generally awash with high-quality protein from animal sources.

All these supergrains qualify as wholegrains, and including them in the mix of your diet can only increase its variety and the range of phytochemicals you're eating. But are they magic? For most of us, no — just useful, interesting wholegrains.

Quinoa Pronounced keen-wa, this grain is high in protein (about 15%) compared with many others and is also high in fibre, with about 8%. It originated in South America, where it was grown by the Incas — which is interesting and sounds good in the marketing, but it doesn't confer any special properties. It's also gluten-free.

Salba Another grain from the Americas, salba was once used by the Aztecs. It's high in fibre, minerals and the plant form of omega-3 fats, a healthy type of fat thought to help prevent heart disease. There are big claims that salba can reduce blood pressure, balance blood sugar and improve heart health, but not enough high-quality studies have been published in medical journals to draw firm conclusions.

Amaranth The Aztecs used amaranth grain, and it spread to other parts of the world such as Africa, India, China and Nepal. It's high in protein and the essential amino acid lysine, which is often missing in more common cereal crops. Amaranth is also high in calcium and iron, compared with other cereals, and contains about 5–9% fats, which are mostly unsaturated. And it's a source of squalene — a phytochemical found in olives and shark livers. Squalene is being investigated as one of the interesting components of the Mediterranean diet. Amaranth is gluten-free.

Millet There are numerous varieties of millet, grown in Africa and India for thousands of years, where it's still an important food crop. In other countries it's mainly grown as animal feed (and birdseed). Millet is a nutritious cereal and, compared with other common cereals, is higher in fat and energy (both important in developing countries) and also higher in iron and calcium. Millet is gluten-free.

Teff This Ethiopian grain is used in a traditional sour bread called 'injera', a bit like a large spongy pancake. It's the smallest grain in the world — 150 teff grains weigh about the same as one wheat grain — which may explain its name; teff is thought to come from the Amharic word for 'lost'. Teff is gluten-free, and a good source of protein and fibre. It has more calcium and iron than common grains, but the high iron level isn't always found when tested. It's thought the iron may be due to the Ethiopian dust that can cling to unwashed tiny teff grains.

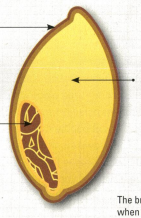
Kamut This is a registered trademark for a relative of durum wheat. Marketers do a good job of romanticising its history: after World War II, a US serviceman found seeds in an Egyptian tomb and posted them home to Montana. After a few false starts, some leftover seed in a jar was propagated and trademarked 'kamut'. It's unlikely the grain sent by the airman really came from a tomb; it's more likely the grain was grown over the years in Egypt by small farmers with diverse crops.

Kamut is higher in protein than regular wheat, but it's not gluten-free. However, claims about the suitability of kamut for people who are allergic to wheat are controversial: www.kamut.com backs up its claims with a research paper on its website, but the only research we could find in the medical literature concluded that kamut doesn't have a different allergenic potential from wheat. If you have a serious wheat allergy, consult your doctor before experimenting with grains such as kamut.

Spelt This relative of normal bread wheat is thought to have originated in Iran and Europe. Spelt has a tough hull that has to be removed as part of the milling process, which is why it fell out of favour in modern breadmaking. It's somewhat higher in fibre than other grains.

There have also been controversial claims about spelt's suitability for people who can't eat wheat. It's not gluten-free, but it's been suggested the protein in it is more digestible than regular wheat. In the US, bread shops have been forced to stop selling spelt bread as 'wheat-free'. The Coeliac Society in Australia doesn't recommend spelt as a suitable grain for coeliacs. ■

Anatomy of a grain



Bran: protects the seed
- Fibre
- B vitamins
- Minerals

Germ: nourishment for the seed
- B vitamins
- Vitamin E
- Minerals
- Phytochemicals

Endosperm: energy for the seed
- Carbohydrates
- Some protein
- Some B vitamins

The bran and germ are removed when wholegrains are refined.

Solar panels: counting the real cost

What does generating electricity from the sun cost and how long does it take for solar panels to pay for themselves?

nutshell

- Do the sums and check if your house is suitable before installing solar panels. Your electricity bills will go down immediately, but the system could take decades to pay for itself.
- Choose panels that meet Australian standards and use an accredited designer/installer.
- Opting for GreenPower with your electricity supplier is a cheaper and easier way to buy renewable energy.

The appeal of making your own electricity from the sun is easy to understand. Climate change is public enemy number one, and it's estimated that the total energy-generating potential if panels were installed on all building rooftops would exceed Australia's electricity demand. Installing a system that produces carbon-free energy and insulates you from rising coal-fired electricity prices has both environmental and financial attractions.

The popularity of solar panels, which can be fixed to your roof to generate electricity, has grown significantly in recent years. But what do they cost, what is their payback time and are they the best way for you to support renewable energy?

How solar systems work

With solar photovoltaic (PV) systems, flat solar modules are mounted on your roof and convert energy from sunlight into direct current (DC) energy. A device called an inverter then changes the DC energy into alternating current (AC) electricity. This can be used to power your household appliances. A grid-connected system can feed excess current into the electricity network, while a standalone system needs a battery to store excess energy.

Solar panels work best when they're north-facing, pointed directly at the sun, at the correct angle and not blocked by trees or shading. The effectiveness of solar panels also depends on where you live and the weather. Of the capital cities, solar panels in Adelaide and Darwin generate the most electricity on average each day, about 30% more than Hobart and Melbourne. These and other factors need to be considered to calculate a system's payback time and likely energy output.

Choosing a solar panel

How much panel capacity do you need?

An average Australian household's electricity use is comparatively high — about 18 kilowatt hours (kWh) per day. Average electricity consumption differs across states.

A 1 kW system — the most popular-sized domestic solar panel — produces nearly 4 kWh per day of electricity, depending on where it's installed. That's about 20% of the average household's electricity consumption. The bigger the system you buy, the more electricity you'll produce.

Does it meet Australian standards?

To be eligible for the government rebate (see page 22), panels must pass international testing and certification, with testing performed by an International Electrotechnical Commission accredited lab. BP Solar is the only manufacturer of solar panels in this country. There's concern about the quality of some panels on the market that don't meet the standards — see *Avoiding dodgy imports* on page 22 for more.

What warranty can you expect?

Manufacturer warranties range from five to 25 years. Solar systems should last at least 25 years; obviously, a warranty of that length is best.

206% The increase in home solar panels installed in the second half of 2007, compared with the first six months of that year. The $8000 rebate was introduced in July 2007, then means-tested in this year's federal budget, leading to many cancellations of orders.

What should you pay?

A standard 1 kW solar panel system costs $12,000–$15,000; 2 kW systems cost about $20,000. Cheaper panels are available, but experts warn that some don't meet Australian standards or last as long as you'd expect. "If something looks impossibly cheap, there's probably something wrong with it," says Dr Muriel Watt of UNSW's School of Photovoltaic and Renewable Energy Engineering. An installation company, LJW Solar, agrees. "Price is indicative of quality," it says. "We stay away from the cheap ones."

Efficiency claims

Manufacturers and suppliers use claims about energy efficiency to help sell their photovoltaic systems, but according to the Alternative Technology Association, an energy efficiency rating doesn't tell you how well the panels will perform. "The most important figures to look at are how much energy the system will produce each year, versus the money spent," the ATA says. >

Creating a sustainable house

For Anthony and Louise from Ashfield in NSW, the motivation to install solar panels came from a desire to create a sustainable house. After installing rainwater tanks, choosing GreenPower electricity and, most importantly, making behavioural changes to reduce their household's electricity consumption, they purchased 27 sq m of solar panels from Origin Energy (a 3.2 kW system). Unfortunately, a west-facing roof means the panels produce less electricity than you'd expect from a north-facing system of the same size.

The panels have so far generated the equivalent of 58% of the household's electricity consumption. The net energy produced after household consumption is fed into the national electricity grid. Origin pays a 'feed-in' tariff of 20 cents per kWh for the net amount of energy exported (after household electricity consumption). The calculations and billing details are complicated, but ultimately Anthony and Louise's first six months of bills were reduced by 70%. Installing the panels will also help the household avoid about three tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions each year.

The net cost of the system, after the government rebate and refunds/rebates from Origin, was $26,450. Of course, Anthony and Louise could have bought fewer panels at a lower cost, but wanted to maximise their renewable energy contribution.

Anthony is pleased with the decision to buy the panels and with the customer service. "Origin took responsibility for the whole process, ensuring the panels were installed correctly by their contractors and explaining how to get the most value from them. The company also provided the documents needed to claim the government rebate. Origin even refunded $1000 after discovering the installers had installed a different model with a slightly lower output."

Anthony and Louise would like to see the NSW government follow the lead of other states by offering a gross feed-in tariff of about four times the rate they pay for electricity. The rate that Origin pays for their household's net energy production is less than double the tariff it charges to supply electricity. Under the current arrangements and rates, it'd take about 50 years for Louise and Anthony to pay back the initial cost of the system — that's longer than the panels are likely to last. Nevertheless, while their quarterly electricity bills have been significantly reduced, what's more important for Louise and Anthony is the amount of clean energy they've generated.

ANTHONY AND LOUISE'S SOLAR PANEL SYSTEM

Initial cost	$37,520
Less: government rebate	$8000
Less: sale of RECs (see page 22)	$2070
Less: refund for lower-output panels	$1000
Net cost	$26,450
Greenhouse gas emissions saved annually (A)	3.1 tonnes
Annual cost savings (A)	$541 (a 70% reduction in electricity charges)
Payback time (years) (B)	49

Buying a solar panel

1. Assess whether your house is suitable. Check if the roof faces the right direction — only north-facing panels will produce their full capacity.
2. Find out what local council approval is needed for installing solar panels.
3. Assess what kilowatt (kW) capacity you need (and can afford).
4. Do the sums to estimate the system's payback time and the environmental difference it will make (see *Weighing up the costs*, page 23).
5. Make sure the panel is approved for a government rebate — even if you're inelgible for the rebate, buying an approved panel will give you more confidence about its quality.
6. Get a range of installation quotes. Make sure the installer is accredited by the Clean Energy Council.

TABLE NOTES

(A) These figures are estimates for one year, based on six months of data. Calculations are based on bills and information provided by the customer and figures from Origin Energy. Calculations exclude the daily supply charge (about 36 cents per day).
(B) Payback time is calculated as the net cost of the panels ($26,450) divided by the estimated annual bill savings ($541). It doesn't take account of the likely rise in electricity prices — which will effectively reduce the payback time of solar panels.

"The means test has decimated our industry. Australian working families have cancelled up to 80% of their solar system orders": Conergy.

< Finding a designer/installer

The good news is that there's an accreditation scheme in Australia, which the industry claims is world's best practice. To be eligible for the $8000 rebate, make sure your designer/installer is accredited by the Clean Energy Council — that means they're deemed qualified to design and install PV systems. There's a list of accredited designers/installers at bcse.org.au. Installers' work is usually guaranteed for one year.

Ideally, look for an accredited company that's been in the business for a while and has an established track record, as well as relevant experience, specialist expertise and a good reputation.

Government rebate means-tested

Government rebates for the installation of PV systems have been running for several years in different forms. But the popularity of solar panels really exploded, admittedly from a small base, when the maximum rebate was increased to $8000 in the May 2007 budget. In the second half of 2007 three times as many panels were installed compared with the first six months of that year.

The rate of growth is expected to slow dramatically following means testing for the rebate, announced in this year's federal budget. The money to pay for the rebate was running out; the scheme was a victim of its own success. But that's scant consolation for households that planned to buy PV systems but can no longer afford to, or to the companies struggling as a result.

"The means test has decimated our industry," says Conergy, a company that makes panels overseas and installs them here. "Australian working families have cancelled up to 80% of their solar system orders — this is a real and immediate threat to our industry."

Did you know

Renewable energy certificates (RECs) are created when you install solar electricity or hot-water systems. They're electronic certificates linked to the carbon emissions saved by installing such systems. You're usually able to sell your RECs to the installer, who will onsell them to companies that need them. For detailed information, go to the renewable energy regulator's website (www.orer.gov.au). Also see *Shining a light on hot water* in CHOICE, August 2008, which covered RECs in more detail. Prices change, but at the time of writing RECs were worth about $600–$1000 for the installation of a 1 kW system.

$100,000 If your household's taxable income is more than that, you're no longer entitled to the $8000 rebate.

If your taxable income is less than $100,000, a rebate of up to $8000 is still available. Further incentives to go green are available in some states; see *Where to get more information*, below right.

Feed-in tariffs

A feed-in tariff is what you're paid for energy you feed into the national electricity grid. Government-mandated feed-in tariffs are only proposed or in place in four states, and they operate differently. A nationally consistent scheme was an election promise of the new Federal Government; a working group will report to the Council of Australian Governments about this proposal in October 2008.

AVOIDING DODGY IMPORTS

There's concern in the industry about the quality of some cheap imported panels. The problem for consumers is that it's impossible to tell a good panel from a bad one just by looking at them. "As Chinese-made panels vary in quality, be careful when considering them," says the Alternative Technology Association. "Most of the good panels come from Europe and the US (often assembled in Mexico), and have brand names including Schott Solar, Kaneka, BP Solar [Australian-made], Sharp, Kyocera and Unisolar. There's at least one good Chinese manufacturer — Suntech. It's a large manufacturer with seemingly good quality control and the panels have long warranty periods."

While nobody wants to spend money on cheap panels that don't last, a more serious concern is over their safety. "People need to be very careful — you get what you pay for," says Ted Spooner of the UNSW School of Electrical Engineering, and chair of Standards Australia's Renewable Energy Systems committee. "There are some bad practices and shonky certificates appearing from labs, saying that the panels meet a standard when they don't. And some panels have the 'CE' mark from Europe, which is totally meaningless in Australia for solar panels. It's self-certification. A poor module manufacturer in China can self-test and put a CE mark on its product — but this is not independent and not worth anything."

The safety risks resulting from poor-quality panels and wiring could even include electrocution or house fires. It's important to check that your installer is accredited.

The standards for solar panels and their wiring are currently being tightened. A list of panels eligible for the government rebate isn't available from the Department of the Environment, but manufacturers must provide the department with proof of their certification by accredited labs to Australian standards, before the panels are eligible. And the Clean Energy Council plans to publish a list of all panel models that meet Australian standards later this year.

The key distinction between feed-in tariff plans, apart from their rates, is whether you're paid for all the energy you feed in (called a 'gross metering' system), or just the difference between the amount of energy your household uses and what it produces ('net metering'). Gross metering is best for households because it means you're paid the higher rate for all the electricity you produce. That system has been used in most countries where solar power has been successful.

With net metering, you don't know what you'll get paid so it's hard to estimate your system's payback time — a disincentive to investing in solar panels. You'll probably be paid less under net metering, because if your household appliances are being used at the same time as the panels are generating electricity (during the day), the 'net' effect is you'd be exporting little energy to the grid.

Unfortunately, Queensland, SA and Victoria plan to introduce net metering. Their expected feed-in tariff rates are:

- $ Queensland and SA: 44 cents/kWh.
- $ Victoria: 60 cents/kWh.

The ACT has had gross metering since 2 July this year, at 67 cents/kWh (3.88 times the retail rate for electricity).

A viable alternative

Choosing a GreenPower scheme from your electricity supplier is a much cheaper and easier way to buy renewable energy that gets fed into the national electricity grid. Choosing the GreenPower option will only cost the average household about $5 extra per week on top of its normal electricity bill. That extra amount is much less than the cost of installing your own solar panels. To have the best effect, choose 100% Accredited GreenPower. Some companies offer a solar power option.

For a full explanation of GreenPower and a detailed comparison of products and prices, see the May 2008 issue of CHOICE or go to choiceextra.com.au and click on that issue under 'Green power' in the index.

Weighing up the real costs

Solar power is currently the most expensive type of renewable energy. The industry says that at present rates, it'll take 15–20 years for a system to pay for itself. But payback times vary widely, depending on a range of variables. For example, Anthony and Louise's case on page 21 shows that a large system in a state without government-mandated gross 'feed-in tariffs' could take 50 years or more to pay for itself.

On the other hand, if you're eligible for the government rebate, are paid a good rate for the energy you produce and buy a smaller system, payback times of 15–20 years are much more likely.

12,514 The number of home solar installations under the government rebate plan, by the end of April 2008.

Here are the eight key issues to consider to get an idea of your system's payback time:

- $ Upfront cost of the panels and installation.
- ? Are you eligible for a rebate?
- ? Is your roof north-facing?
- ? What will you be paid for electricity you produce?
- ? Does gross or net metering apply? (see *Feed-in tariffs*, far left). Net metering makes payback times more difficult to work out, as you don't know what proportion of energy generated will be exported to the grid.
- $ System size: 1 kW systems have the shortest payback time, as (if you're eligible) the rebate's value is a high proportion of the cost of the system.
- ? What are the Renewable Energy Certificates worth? (see *Did you know?*, page 22).
- $ The cost of upkeep. While proponents of solar panels say they're reliable and require little maintenance apart from occasional cleaning, you'll need to replace the inverter once during the PV system's lifetime (an inverter usually costs several hundred dollars).

On the upside, take rising electricity costs into account. Producing your own solar electricity is becoming increasingly financially attractive as coal-fired electricity prices are expected to rise. ■

Producing your own solar energy is becoming increasingly financially attractive as coal-fired electricity prices are expected to rise.

WHERE TO GET MORE INFORMATION

- If you're serious about installing solar panels, the Clean Energy Council's comprehensive booklet *Solar PV systems explained* is a must-read. Call 03 9929 4100 or email info@cleanenergycouncil.org.au for a free copy, or download it from cleanenergycouncil.org.au.
- The Department of Climate Change (climatechange.gov.au) has rebate information and application forms, and information about low-interest loans for households buying energy- and water-saving devices (including solar panels).
- The Alternative Technology Association's *ReNew* magazine includes buying guides, and its detailed solar panels report is available online (ata.org.au).
- Solar hot water systems: see the August 2008 issue of CHOICE.

Extra cover for your health

CHOICE's Best Buys can save your family on average between $320 and $800 per year for 'extras' health insurance.

nutshell

▶ Most of the 87 ancillary health policies in our survey don't cover all your dental or optical expenses.

▶ There's a big difference in annual total per-person limits for a range of popular services, from just $425 under the lowest-paying policy to $8735 from the top-paying one.

Extras policies cover services not covered by Medicare, such as visits to the dentist, glasses and contact lenses, physiotherapy, massage and hearing aids.

CHOICE's Best Buys can save your family on average per year:

- $800 for top family cover.
- $620 for medium family cover.
- $320 for budget couples cover.

Government penalties, such as Lifetime Health Cover (a higher premium if you take out hospital insurance later in life) and the Medicare Levy surcharge for high income earners, don't apply to extras cover. So there's no reason other than convenience to take out a combined hospital and extras policy, and you can save money by looking at extras cover separately. We didn't include combined policies when selecting the Best Buys.

Getting the best deal

Extras cover is usually only a good deal if you get a benefit that's higher than the premium you pay. Take these steps when choosing a policy:

- Work out what type of extras services you use, and how much you spend on them per year.
- If you don't have an extras policy, get the policy documents for the Best Buys in your state and see whether you'll be able to claim back enough of your expenses to make taking out a policy worthwhile.
- If you already have an extras policy, compare your outgoings with the benefits you've received from your fund. Now compare this with your premium. If you pay much more than you get back, it's worth looking at the Best Buys to find a policy with payouts that match your needs better. Alternatively, you could be better off giving up extras cover altogether.
- Check waiting periods; they vary among different funds and therapies, usually ranging from two months for a dental check-up to 36 months for a hearing aid.

How much do they pay?

There are major differences among the surveyed policies in the amounts they pay and the range of services they cover, such as dental, optical, physiotherapy, chiropractic, natural therapies, hearing aids and blood glucose monitors. The top-paying policy, PEOPLECARE Gold Extras, has an annual limit of $8735 per person plus unlimited general dental services. In contrast, the lowest-paying policy, LATROBE Extras Table, covers various services — but not dental — with a limit of $425 per person in total. Of course its premium is a lot lower too.

Most extras policies in our survey will fall short of covering all your costs. For example:

- **Crown (major dental procedure)** The best policy pays up to $1164, whereas the policy with the lowest cover only pays up to $225. Some policies don't cover the procedure at all.
- **Multivision glasses** The worst policy pays up to $100, the best $300 — and that could easily leave you out of pocket for about a third of the cost or more.

Instead of a specified amount, some policies pay a percentage of the charge, ranging from 40% to 100%, up to an annual limit. This gives you a clear understanding of what your out-of-pocket costs will be. ■

MORE ON CHOICE ONLINE

CHOICE Online members have access to the full database for all extras, hospital and combined policies on choice.com.au/money. CHOICE subscribers get discounted membership to CHOICE Online. To add it to your subscription go to choiceextra.com.au or call Consumer Services on 1800 069 552.

CHOICE BEST BUYS		MONTHLY PRICE IN STATES WHERE POLICY IS A BEST BUY ($)*						
Fund and policy (in score order, alphabetically when equal)	**Score (%)**	**ACT and NSW**	**NT**	**Queensland**	**SA**	**Tasmania**	**Victoria**	**WA**
TOP FAMILY COVER								
Peoplecare Gold Extras	86	80	80	80	80	80	80	80
HBA / Mutual Community Platinum Extras	80		99					
HCF Multicover Only	80	118	95	86	86	95	86	95
MEDIUM FAMILY COVER								
Medibank Private Blue Ribbon	75		55	71	69	52		
GMHBA Gold Extras	73	74						
HBA / Mutual Community Silver Extras	67–69 (A)			63		54	70	63
St Lukes Extras Platinum — Y4	67	65		65	65		65	65
AHM Lifestyle Extras	65	69	53	63	60		65	58
MBF Classic Extras	65–66 (B)		48	66		56	69	61
BUDGET COUPLES COVER								
HBF Essentials Saver	52							37
GMHBA Bronze Extras	46 (C)	32		33	37	37		32
HBA / Mutual Community Standard Extras	46–48 (D)				36	37		
MBF Young Extras	43–47 (E)	27	24	27	31	24	29	26
NRMA / SGIC / SGIO Extras Select	40	27	26		31		28	28

It might be convenient to take out a combined hospital and extras policy, but you can save money by taking extras cover separately.

USING THE TABLE

All premiums shown are for a family or couple for a month, with the 30% government rebate already deducted. (If you or your spouse are 65 or older you receive a 35% rebate; 40% for 70+.) Single premiums are usually half the family or couple premium. Shop around if you're a single parent, as some funds give you a large discount on the family premium. **TIP** Your health fund may give you a discount if you pay your premium annually and/or by direct debit.

For contact details of the 18 insurance companies CHOICE surveyed, see *Best health cover choices* (which gave Best Buys for hospital policies) on page 26 of the August 2008 issue, or go to choiceextra.com.au and click on that issue under 'Health insurance' in the index.

Best Buys

A Best Buy is a good policy within its category that also has a comparatively low premium. We picked three different categories of Best Buy:

- **Top family cover** These are selected from the best policies in our survey. As well as other services, they cover general dental, major dental and orthodontics and scored 80% or more.
- **Medium family cover** These give a medium level of cover for a competitive price. As well as other services, they cover general dental, major dental and orthodontics and scored at least 65%.
- **Budget couples cover** These are competitively priced policies with a low level of cover for a range of services, including general dental and major dental, but (with one exception) not orthodontics. However, they probably aren't suitable if you think you'll need expensive major dental treatment, as their limits may be too low. The policies scored at least 40%.

Score

The score is based on:

- **Coverage score (30%)** The range of different services covered by the policy, including general and major dental, orthodontics, optical services, physiotherapy, chiropractic, podiatry, psychology, pharmacy, acupuncture, naturopathy, remedial massage, hearing aids and blood glucose monitor.
- **Benefit score (35%)** The amount of benefit paid for a specific treatment, such as a dental check-up or crown, pair of glasses or visit to a physiotherapist or chiropractor, and whether a higher benefit is available if you go to service providers nominated by the health fund.
- **Annual limit score (35%)** The total annual combined limit per person for the services listed under *Coverage score*, after the waiting period is served, and whether that limit increases in subsequent years.

TABLE NOTES

** Monthly premium prices for a family for premium and medium cover, and for a couple for budget cover, with the 30% monthly rebate already deducted.*
(A) 67% Tasmania, 69% Queensland, Victoria, WA.
(B) 65% Queensland, 66% NT, Tasmania, Victoria, WA.
(C) This policy includes some benefits paid for orthodontics.
(D) 46% Tasmania , 48% SA.
(E) 43% Queensland, 44% other states.

Sweet delight

A sticky wine rounds off a good dinner to perfection. CHOICE's expert tasters found some heavenly dessert wines that don't cost the earth.

nutshell

▶ The expert tasters picked six dessert wines to make up the CHOICE Selection, costing from $9 to $43, to suit a range of pockets.

▶ Late harvest, botrytis-affected, ice wine — they're all dessert styles, but different, and all included in our taste test.

Their luscious sticky texture and appealing golden glow give dessert wines a quality of sumptuous indulgence. Yet 'stickies', as they're affectionately known, make up less than 5% of the wine we enjoy in Australia. They deserve greater popularity. The right one can add that special touch to a dinner party, and leave you with money left over for the perfect dessert to accompany it.

Vive la différence

Dessert wines are traditionally made from grapes harvested late in the season. This allows extra sugar to accumulate in the juice but results in a much lower yield — one reason why stickies can be expensive.

Wine is usually fermented until it's 'dry' — meaning that almost all the sugar in the juice (winemakers call it 'must' at this stage) has been converted into alcohol by yeast fermentation. Fermentation stops when the alcohol level reaches about 14% — the yeast stops growing because it's effectively pickled.

Because of the extra sugar in the juice used for dessert wines, there's enough sugar left after fermentation to give them their characteristic body and sweetness. Often the high sugar concentration causes fermentation to stop at lower alcohol levels. Even a medium-sweet table wine has a sugar content of no more than about 3%, whereas a dessert wine is typically 10%–20% sugar.

Stickies are very different from fortified wines, such as port or muscat. Fortified wines are made by adding spirit to part-fermented wine to pickle the yeast while there's still unfermented sugar. Their alcohol content is typically 15%–20%.

Australian dessert wines fall into two groups:

Late harvest The grapes are harvested when the berries have dried and shrivelled on the vines in late autumn. There's little juice but the sugar can be 35% of the weight of the grape.

Botrytis-affected styles These wines are also made from grapes harvested late in the season, but the fruit is infected with a mould, *Botrytis cinerea* — 'noble rot'. The mould grows on the skin of the grapes when conditions are just right — when dew and early morning mists are followed by warm sunny days. It gradually draws moisture from the berries, intensifying the sugar concentration, acidity and fruit flavours. The botrytis also contributes flavour notes of its own, which give these wines their special appeal. But the degree of botrytis infection can vary, so there isn't always a clear distinction between late harvest and botrytis-affected styles.

CHOICE Dessert Wine Selection $

ICE WINES

SEIFRIED Nelson Riesling Ice Wine 2007	$35.50

LATE HARVEST

MIRANDA The Pioneers Raisined Muscat 2006	$9.00

BOTRYTIS-AFFECTED

LILLYPILLY Noble Sauvignon Blanc 2002	$21.00
MIRANDA Golden Botrytis 2002	$18.50
TEMPUS TWO Botrytis Semillon 2005	$20.00
VINIFERA Easter Semillon 2005	$23.00

Cold comfort

Three of the wines in our test were imported 'ice wines' (*Eiswein* in German). This style of wine is a speciality of regions that get really cold late in the season, such as Germany, Austria and Canada. The grapes are picked and pressed while frozen, sometimes at night. The ice crystals in the part-frozen juice contain very little sugar and remain with the skins, pips and other solids, leaving a concentrated juice that contains as much as 30% sugar.

This method also concentrates the acid in the juice. It's the much higher acidity of ice wines (compared with late harvest) that gives them their characteristic refreshing sweetness. Two of the ice wines in our test were produced in New Zealand by simulating this process using refrigeration.

Expert opinion ...

The CHOICE expert panel (see below) tasted 38 dessert wines that you should find in bottle shops with a good range of stock. The wines were tasted in groups — ice wines, followed by late harvest and finally botrytis-affected. The experts knew the type of dessert wine they were tasting, but otherwise they were identified only by numbers.

The experts are trained to ignore personal preferences and look only for attributes that indicate a wine is well made and has no obvious faults. A score of 14–15 points (out of 20) indicates the wine is OK but nothing special. A wine that scores 15–16.9 points is awarded a bronze medal at wine shows, 17–18.4 points earns a silver and 18.5 points or more a gold medal. One wine, LILLYPILLY Noble Sauvignon Blanc, was in the gold medal class, and all the other wines in our *CHOICE Selection* would have won silver.

... and the average punter agrees

We've only printed the experts' scores but we also had some dessert wine lovers taste some of the wines to see whether they shared their views. On the whole, the 'lay' panel liked the experts' top-scoring wines and disliked those that the experts rated poorly. The lay panel also gave top scores to some of the wines that divided the experts — KRACHER Eiswein Cuvée 2005, VIRTU Noble Semillon 2000, DE BORTOLI Noble One Botrytis Semillon 2006 and TRENTHAM ESTATE Noble Taminga 2003.

Serving stickies

Experts recommend serving dessert wines slightly chilled rather than straight from the fridge. And because you don't drink as much of them as other wines they should be served in a smaller glass, such as a sherry glass. It's also preferable that the glass is tulip-shaped to capture the fruity aromas and acidity that balance the wine's sweetness.

Steer clear of heavy desserts (especially chocolate); dessert wines are best with fresh fruit or lighter desserts such as a lemon tart, caramelised pears or crème brûlée. And there's nothing wrong with serving a dessert wine as an aperitif with blue or soft cheeses or a pâté. >

Steer clear of chocolate with dessert wines, or 'stickies' — they're best served with lighter desserts, such as lemon tart.

Meet the experts

Liz Augustyn

Liz is assistant winemaker at Margan Family Winegrowers in the Hunter Valley. She studied oenology at Elsenburg Agricultural College in South Africa and worked as a winemaker in the Stellenbosch region before coming to Australia.

Garry Ford

Garry is a winemaker with the Hardy Wine Company in South Australia. His 25 years' experience in wine making have included vintages in France, South Africa and Germany.

Phillip Gregory

Phillip has a Master of Wine Quality from the University of Western Sydney. He's been a wine judge, educator and regular participant in wine tastings and competitions.

Paul Rogers

Paul is a wine lawyer and consultant to the Australian wine industry. He lectures on wine law at the University of Western Sydney.

Geoff Skurray

We were saddened to hear of the sudden death of Professor Geoff Skurray. Geoff was a food scientist at the University of Western Sydney, who in recent years also distinguished himself as a winemaker, wine judge, industry consultant and educator. He was a regular wine judge for CHOICE and someone we could always rely on for authoritative and impartial advice on questions related to food and nutrition generally. He will be greatly missed.

DESSERT WINES

Brand (in rank order within groups)	Score out of 20	Alcohol (%)	Origin	Price ($)	Tasting notes
ICE WINES					
Seifried Nelson Riesling Ice Wine 2007	17	10	NZ	35.50	Brilliant yellow-gold; appealing citrus and honey notes — well balanced, not overly sweet or sticky.
Brightwater Riesling Ice Wine 2005	15	10	NZ	26.00	Pale green; leaner-bodied; subdued nose with no obvious fruit flavour — a little too sharp.
Mixed emotions					
Kracher Eiswein Cuvée 2005	14.5–18	9	Austria	43.00	Dark gold; big luscious style with raisins and toffee; nice sweetness on the palate but a bit tired — well balanced; lacks freshness, past its best.
LATE HARVEST					
Miranda The Pioneers Raisined Muscat 2006	17	11	Australia	9.00	Golden yellow; passionfruit and frangipani nose; unusual floral muscatty palate — a sound, clean wine with excellent fruit and flavour.
Baily & Baily Queen Bee Sticky 2006	16.5	11.5	Australia	10.00	Pale yellow; light floral nose; lime-citrus flavours — medium-bodied with a good finish.
Brown Brothers Orange Muscat & Flora Special Late Harvest 2007	16.5	9.5	Australia	11.50	Green-yellow; refreshing bright floral nose; grapefruit, apricot — attractive, fresh and fruity.
Cloudy Bay Late Harvest Riesling 2004	16.5	11.5	NZ	37.00	Light green; a bit flat and simple; spice with citrus and lime — a fresh finish but lacks flavour.
Scarborough Late Harvest Semillon 2007	16.5	9.5	Australia	22.50	Green-yellow; delicate citrus nose, a bit shy; fresh crisp finish — lacks fruit intensity.
Arrogant Frog Sticky White 2006	16	15	France	13.00	Pale yellow; lacks fruit, sharp on the nose; spicy flavour, a little hot — not balanced and has a metallic aftertaste.
Pirramimma Late Harvest Riesling 2005 (A)	15	11.5	Australia	18.00	Light green; rubbery, kerosene nose; too sweet, lacks acid and flavour — not pleasant at all.
Stella Bella Margaret River Pink Muscat 2007	15	7.5	Australia	18.50	Salmon pink; floral, muscat aromas with a hint of strawberries; thin and dry with a slight fizziness on the palate — clean taste but simple.
Torbreck The Bothie Barossa Valley 2007	15	14	Australia	20.00	Pale straw; kerosene nose lacking fruit; lemonade flavour — clean finish but lacks flavour.
Houghton Late Picked Verdelho 2006 (B)	14.5	11.5	Australia	13.50	Light straw colour; very shy nose, citrus flavours; dry though balanced — low in sugar and lacks flavour.
Vino Dei Santi Solo Arte NV (A)	13	16	Italy	14.50	Deep golden colour; oxidised stewed-fruit nose; a strange flavour with burnt sugar notes — a wine that didn't deliver.
Mixed emotions					
Foxeys Hangout Late Harvest Pinot Gris 2006	15–18	10.5	Australia	26.00	Pale straw; apricots with floral overtones; flat with a slight rubber flavour; luscious with a great balance; not clean — very appealing; lacks some vibrancy.
BOTRYTIS-AFFECTED					
Lillypilly Noble Sauvignon Blanc 2002	18.5	12.5	Australia	21.00	Yellow-gold; full luscious nose with apricots, orange marmalade and a touch of oak; great mouthfeel, good finish — all the flavours, balance and complexity.
Miranda Golden Botrytis 2002	18	10	Australia	18.50	Golden; rich fruitcake and marmalade nose; more oak than botrytis — a beauty, with excellent balance of fruit and sweetness.
Tempus Two Botrytis Semillon 2005 (C)	18	10.5	Australia	20.00	Pale yellow; lemon and lime nose with hints of honey; well balanced — some lovely flavours.
Vinifera Easter Semillon 2005	18	12	Australia	23.00	Golden yellow; nutty flavours with apricots — lovely texture and flavour.
d'Arenberg The Noble McLaren Vale Riesling 2007	17.5	9.5	Australia	25.50	Deep golden colour; nutty fruitcake nose; full-bodied with a good botrytis level — excellent style.
Bimbadgen Myall Road Botrytis Semillon 2006	17	10.5	Australia	17.00	Pale yellow; full fruity nose with oak and a nutty flavour; lovely creamy texture — not super-complex but zingy and fresh.

DESSERT WINES, CONTINUED

Brand (in rank order within groups)	Score out of 20	Alcohol (%)	Origin	Price ($)	Tasting notes
BOTRYTIS-AFFECTED, CONTINUED					
Cookoothama Botrytis Semillon 2006	17	11	Australia	20.50	Pale green-yellow; nutty nose with marmalade and fruitcake notes; well balanced, luscious style — sweet, solid, flavoursome and balanced.
Elderton Botrytis Semillon 2006	17	11.5	Australia	21.00	Golden; fresh upfront fruit flavours; rich and luscious — lovely balance and freshness for a mature style.
Heggies Botrytis Riesling 2006	17	10	Australia	25.00	Yellow-green; lime and pineapple nose; excellent acid-sugar balance — clean finish with a lingering flavour.
McWilliams Riverina Botrytis Semillon 2005	17	11	Australia	25.00	Yellow-gold; hazelnuts, lemons, limes; perfect balance with a clean, delicate flavour — lovely zing, lovely texture.
Spy Valley Marlborough Noble Chardonnay 2007	17	13.5	NZ	21.50	Medium yellow colour; floral citrus nose; not a lot of botrytis but well balanced — not complex but sound and flavoursome.
Westend Estate Botrytis Semillon 2006	17	12	Australia	30.50	Pale yellow colour; tropical fruit flavours with loads of pineapple and floral notes — attractive and fresh, with good balance and length.
Hollick The Nectar Coonawarra 2006	16.5	13	Australia	22.00	Light yellow; floral, fruity nose; a bit dry and flabby — a wine that doesn't offer richness and complexity.
Deen De Bortoli Vat 5 Botrytis Semillon 2006	16	11	Australia	11.00	Pale green-yellow; full fruit flavours but no real botrytis; clean finish but lacks flavour.
Tim Adams Botrytis Affected Riesling 2006	16	12	Australia	29.00	Pale yellow; lemon and nuts; light on flavour and not sweet enough — a wine that doesn't know what it wants to be.
Woodstock Botrytis 2005	16	10.5	Australia	18.00	Deep yellow; no botrytis flavours; dried fruit with citrus notes — full-bodied but cloying and simple.
Mitchelton Blackwood Park Botrytis Riesling 2006	15	12.5	Australia	16.00	Pale yellow; burnt flavour, lacks fruit; drier style, not well balanced — lacks what it takes.
Mixed emotions					
De Bortoli Noble One Botrytis Semillon 2006	16–19.5	11	Australia	31.00	Golden yellow; luscious but not oversweet; hot, burnt and unbalanced — elegant style with a lovely creamy texture; low flavour and not enough acid.
Hardy's Padthaway Noble Riesling 2006	15.5–19	10	Australia	19.00	Pale yellow; fruity floral style; faint plastic smell; lovely drier style with figs, apricots and hazelnuts — a complex wine with a clean, fresh finish; no botrytis flavours.
Margan Botrytis Semillon 2007	15.5–18.5	9.5	Australia	29.00	Pale gold; nutty, citrus flavour with hints of honey; slightly mouldy and not quite in balance — delicate, lighter style, rich in flavours; lacks a distinct flavour.
Trentham Estate Noble Taminga 2003	15–18.5	11	Australia	13.00	Yellow-gold; nice floral, fruity nose; cloying, lacks acidity — excellent flavours; oxidised, getting tired.
Virtu Noble Semillon 2000	14.5–18.5	12.5	NZ	29.00	Yellow-green; lovely oak, dried fruits and figs; dull; lovely flavours and richness; oxidised palate — a big luxurious style with lovely layers of flavour; oxidised.
Chateau Les Tuilleries Sauternes 2002	14–18.5	14	France	32.00	Golden-green; nutty, yeasty nose with apricots and honey; a bit tired; lovely texture; sharpness overshadows the fruit — excellent fruit flavours; not a perfect style.

USING THE TABLE

Score Each expert gave the wines a score out of 20 according to the international show-scoring system for wines: 3 for appearance, 7 for nose (aroma) and 10 for palate. The score printed in the table is a consensus score reached when discussing the wines after the tasting, still without knowing what the wines were. See *Expert opinion*, page 27, for more on the scoring system.

When the wine received a wide range of scores and consensus couldn't be reached, we called it a *Mixed emotion*, listed the range of scores and included two overall sets of comments to reflect the tasters' views. If it sounds as if you might like it, give it a try.

Alcohol The alcohol content of dessert wines varies more than normal wines, from very low (such as 7.5%) to very high (16%). The figures in the table are the percentage alcohol by volume as stated on the label.

Price This is for a 375 mL bottle (unless otherwise indicated) and is based on prices we paid in bottle shops in Sydney in July 2008. We found significant price variations, so it pays to shop around and look for specials.

Tasting notes These are compiled from the experts' notes on the wine's colour and appearance, nose, palate and overall impression. Combined with the scores, they should give you a good indication of the wine's style, aroma and flavour.

TABLE NOTES

(A) 500 mL
(B) 750 mL
(C) 250 mL

Dream machines

AV receivers are supposed to turn your living room into a cinema. Our buying guide tells you what you need to know. Plus we picked four products at different price points to help you decide how much to spend.

SONY STR-DE400
Price $499

SONY STR-DG910
Price $1199

SONY STR-DA3300ES
Price $1999

SONY STR-DA5300ES
Price $2999

nutshell

- Setting up a state-of-the art home theatre requires an audiovisual receiver to link your Blu-ray, DVD, CD, VCR and set-top box to your screen and speakers.
- We explain what these AV receivers do — and what to look for.
- We also demystify some of the more arcane technical jargon.

An audiovisual (AV) receiver is the hub of any home theatre system. Its job is to take the sound and video information from your DVD, CD player or set-top-box and, if necessary, convert it to an appropriate output — then send it through to your screen and speakers.

Out of the box

The main aim of any home theatre system is to get a cinema-like experience in your home. For this you need good quality in both sound and picture. The picture quality is largely determined by the screen, while your speakers are the most important factor in good sound. However, the AV receiver controls both, so it needs to match them for quality and connections (see *What to look for*, far right).

When you buy a 'home theatre in a box' the AV receiver and DVD/CD player are often combined into one unit, which you connect to the speakers and TV. However, there are two good reasons to buy separate components: you get more control over the quality of each and, should one component break down, you don't have to replace the whole system. The former is by far the most important.

Controls

The front panel controls should allow you to perform all the basic functions necessary to set up and use the receiver. You can expect the volume control to be the largest dial, but different manufacturers will design other controls in different ways.

What to look for

AV CONNECTIONS

The receiver needs enough ins and outs to cover all the home theatre devices you have, or are likely to have in the near future. In general, the more you pay the more connections you get.

As you can see, the back of these receivers can look daunting, but you only need to connect the devices you have, so you can ignore the rest of the connectors. It's really just a matter of knowing which ones attach to what.

HDMI is a digital connection via a single cord that does everything for both sound and vision. It's very handy, provides excellent-quality sound and vision, and saves clutter. However, the receiver and the device connected via HDMI need to 'talk' to each other. Problems can occur if the HDMI standard isn't implemented exactly. Also, HDMI includes a copy-protection component that can interfere with signals under some conditions.

Digital sound can be either via an optical (Toslink) or a coaxial cable, if you don't use HDMI. It doesn't matter which you use, so long as the receiver and the device to be attached have the same type of connector. Having both optical and coaxial connections is handy for attaching a new device in the future.

Analogue sound can be stereo or multi-channel, depending on the connections available. Of our four examples, only the two most expensive products have both. The cheaper two only have stereo analogue inputs. **Multi-channel connections** are only useful if you want to use your DVD or CD player's onboard DAC (digital to analogue converter; see *Jargon buster*, page 33).

Analogue video comes in three types: **composite**, **s-video** or **component**. The latter is the best quality and most likely the one you'll want to use to connect your main video devices (DVD or set-top box), if you're not using HDMI. The SONY STR-DA5300ES and the next two in order of price have three component connections each. However, if you wanted to connect a DVD, set-top-box and VCR via component, the cheapest of our four examples (SONY STR-DE400) wouldn't allow it, as it has only two component inputs.

The two cheaper examples have no onscreen menu function, so the display on the front of the device is the only way of knowing what it's doing. This front panel display is very important for all AV receivers because it's your primary source of information on the receiver's settings.

The STR-DA5300ES and STR-DA3300ES have onscreen menus (sometimes called a **graphic user interface** or **GUI**) that appear on your TV (see the photo, left). These make it easier to do more complicated setting up because you can see all the options at once, rather than having to cycle through them on the front panel display. However, most of these settings are unlikely to be used often, so a GUI is handy but not essential.

The **remote control** is very important. Its design has to allow you to control all the receiver's functions. The STR-DE400 comes with a basic remote that can control the receiver and some other SONY devices, such as a DVD or video player. The more expensive models allow you to use the remote to control other brands' devices as well, but none would be as versatile as the best of the universal remote controls we reported on in CHOICE, July 2008.

The STR-DA5300ES comes with a second remote control that's smaller and easier to use than the main one. However, it can only perform basic functions. >

NOT JUST SONY

We picked four Sony models from different sectors of the market to illustrate what you can expect for your money. There are of course many other brands on the market, such as Denon, Harmon Kardon, JVC, Kenwood, Marantz, Onkyo, Panasonic, Pioneer, Rotel and Yamaha. Any of these (and probably many more) could have a model that suits your needs better than our examples. It's worth spending the time to compare specifications.

No-glow zone

Here's the lowdown on sweat — plus a CHOICE user trial of antiperspirants that claim to avoid those dreaded white marks.

nutshell

- Antiperspirants and deodorants don't cause breast cancer, Alzheimer's Disease or any other health problem.
- 'No white marks' on clothes or skin is a valid claim for most of the antiperspirants CHOICE's Home Testers put on trial.

For most of us, antiperspirants and deodorants are part of our daily toilette, one pretty much taken for granted. Yet for others they're a chemical cocktail of poisons and carcinogens. So what's the truth? CHOICE investigates, as we answer common questions about sweat, antiperspirant and deodorant.

Seven most asked questions

1 What is sweat?

Sweating is the body's way of dealing with excessive heat — as the moisture evaporates it cools the skin and reduces body temperature. There are two different kinds of sweat produced by two kinds of sweat gland. *Eccrine* sweat glands produce sweat containing mainly water and some salts (electrolytes), and comes out of dedicated pores in the skin. *Apocrine* sweat glands produce a thicker, milky liquid containing proteins, ammonia and fatty acids. This sweat is secreted through hair follicles, not dedicated pores.

The adult human skin has several million sweat glands over almost the entire body, with high concentrations of eccrine glands on the forehead, palms, armpits and soles of the feet. Apocrine glands are in high concentrations in the armpits and anal-genital area.

Sweat itself doesn't smell — or not much. It's the bacteria breaking down organic compounds in sweat that smell. The more 'organic' the sweat, the more bacteria, and the greater the smell. The apocrine sweat produced in our armpits is rich in organic matter, and the warm, moist conditions are ideal for sweat-eating bacteria. Having hairy armpits increases the surface area for bacteria, which in turn increases the smell.

2 How do they work?

Antiperspirants reduce sweating, deodorants don't — they mask or reduce the odour associated with sweat. **Antiperspirants** contain aluminium compounds, which reduce sweating by temporarily plugging pores. They often also contain deodorising ingredients.

Deodorants often contain antibacterial ingredients that help reduce bacteria ultimately responsible for making the smell. They may also contain perfumes that mask the smell.

Some people argue that the body sweats for a reason and so stopping the sweating is bad. However, only 1% of the body's sweat glands are in the armpits, so you won't overheat and die by using antiperspirants. Besides, antiperspirants don't entirely prevent perspiration — the best ones reduce sweating by only 30%.

3 Do antiperspirants cause cancer?

Some years ago, there were claims that antiperspirants were the 'leading cause of breast cancer'. One explanation given was that by stopping perspiration, antiperspirants allow toxins to build up in armpit lymph nodes (near the breasts), leading to cell mutations (cancer) in that area.

Another proposed explanation was that parabens (preservatives in antiperspirants and deodorants) found in breast cancer tissue had caused the cancer. The European Commission's Scientific Committee on Consumer Products investigated these claims and decided that methyl and ethyl parabens were safe to use as recommended, but that there wasn't enough data on other forms of parabens to draw a definitive conclusion.

If parabens and toxins still alarm you, many extremely thorough epidemiological studies have failed to find that using an antiperspirant is even a risk factor for developing breast cancer, and definitely not the leading cause of it. >

DO 'NO WHITE MARKS' SPRAYS WORK?

White marks caused by antiperspirant residue on skin and clothing are anathema to the wearer of the LBD — the little black dress. Some antiperspirant sprays claim to reduce or eliminate these white marks, so with the help of 121 CHOICE Home Testers, we put eight of the these products to the test.

The good news is that all except NIVEA Pure Invisible were found to mostly live up to the claims. Best overall was DOVE Clear Touch, with the best scores for both fragrance and average 'no white marks' success. The others in our *What to buy* list also scored well.

These 'no white marks' products are more expensive than their regular counterparts, but if white marks are an issue for you, you probably won't care.

What to buy

DOVE CLEAR TOUCH

PRICE $4.45 / 100 g

TRIALIST COMMENTS

"I loved this deodorant. It left no white marks and the fragrance was subtle but enough to prevent perspiration odour. I will definitely keep using this deodorant."

REXONA CRYSTAL PURE SILVER

PRICE $4.88 / 100 g

TRIALIST COMMENTS

"Great scent, no marks. Would definitely buy this one."

ADIDAS WOMEN ACTION 3 FRESH

PRICE $4.20 / 100 g

TRIALIST COMMENTS

"I liked the smell and the way it dried quickly."

NORSCA CLEAR

PRICE $4.46 / 100 g

TRIALIST COMMENTS

"I love that this goes on dry, so you feel comfortable all day. Absolutely no marks anywhere. Felt great!"

"Although the fragrance wasn't unpleasant, it would have been nicer if it was a bit more 'girly'."

REXONA CRYSTAL CLEAR AQUA

PRICE $4.88 / 100 g

TRIALIST COMMENTS

"A bit of a strong, sweet smell, but not too offensive."

"Made me sneeze."

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE					COST
Brand (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Fragrance score (%)	Average 'no white marks' score (%)	'No white marks' on clothes score (%)	'No white marks' on skin score (%)	Price per 100 g ($)
Dove Clear Touch	76	78	97	94	100	4.45
Rexona Crystal Pure Silver	73	74	93	95	91	4.88
Adidas Women Action 3 Fresh	72	77	91	93	89	4.20
Norsca Clear	70	69	96	98	94	4.46
Rexona Crystal Clear Aqua	70	74	87	88	86	4.88
Adidas Women Action 3 Intensive	67	69	83	80	85	4.16
Adidas Women Action 3 Sensitive	67	70	91	91	91	4.62
Nivea Pure Invisible	66	70	70	84	55	4.35

USING THE TABLE

Scores Trialists gave a separate overall score; it's not a combination of the other scores.
Average 'no white marks' score The scores for clothes and skin were weighted equally for this score.

HOW WE TESTED

We recruited 121 female trialists from our Home Testers register and sent each of them three cans of 'no white marks' aerosol antiperspirant. They used each aerosol for three days before filling in a questionnaire to rate the product for:

- Appearance of **white marks** on skin and clothing.
- **Fragrance**.

They then gave an **overall score** to each deodorant based on these factors. We asked trialists not to rate the deodorants for their antiperspirant performance, as this is difficult to measure with only three days' use of each product.

4 What about the aluminium?

Aluminium is a known neurotoxin and high levels can cause brain cell damage. It's also been linked with Alzheimer's Disease, though the link is controversial and it doesn't appear to cause the disease.

As the third most common element on the Earth's crust after oxygen and silicon, aluminium is found in all sorts of products. It's in air, water and food, especially processed foods such as baking powder, colourings, anti-caking agents, processed cheese, acidic food cooked in aluminum utensils and liquids in aluminium cans.

It's estimated we eat 5–20 mg of aluminium per day, almost all (more than 99%) of which is passed out without being absorbed into the bloodstream. The aluminium content absorbed from antiperspirants has been measured at about 4 micrograms, which is about 2.5% of the daily amount absorbed from the gut. Kidneys filter much of that from the bloodstream.

5 Are there any 'natural' deodorising alternatives?

Despite the negligible risks, some people still prefer to avoid using aluminium products on their skin. Apart from aluminium-free deodorants (as opposed to antiperspirants) there are various 'natural' alternatives available in healthfood shops and over the internet.

Deodorant crystals are a popular alternative. Their active ingredient is alum, usually in the form of potassium aluminium sulphate or ammonium aluminium sulphate. So they do contain a form of aluminium. However, companies claim the aluminium is bonded to a molecule that's too large to penetrate the skin. Alum is an astringent, which means it shrinks or constricts pores, and may help reduce perspiration. It may also have antibacterial properties.

A homemade deodorant can be made from equal parts of corn starch and sodium bicarbonate mixed with essential oils to reduce the activity of bacteria — sage, thyme and cinnamon are all reported to be good deodorants, while sage is also recommended for its antiperspirant qualities.

6 What if you sweat a lot?

Hyperhidrosis is the name for excessive sweating. As well as suffering from embarrassment, people with the condition are prone to dermatitis, rashes where sweat collects in skin folds and fungal infections such as tinea. It could also be a symptom of a serious underlying condition, so it's worth consulting your doctor.

The first line of treatment is a roll-on antiperspirant with a high level of aluminium chlorohydrate. DRICLOR is recommended and needs to be applied to cool, clean armpits at night to give it time to work.

Botox injections have been successfully used to disable nerves responsible for activating sweat glands in armpits, hands and feet. However, at about $1000 for armpits, it's expensive, it may produce unwanted effects in other muscles, especially when used on the hands, and the desirable effects are only temporary, ranging from three months to a year. Surgery is considered a last resort.

7 Do sprays really harm the environment?

There are two main environmental concerns with spray deodorants: the propellant and the packaging. In the propellant, safer alternatives to chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), which were implicated in the destruction of the ozone layer, are now used. Many councils collect aerosol cans for recycling. Contact yours if you're not sure. ■

Thorough studies have failed to find that using anti-perspirant is even a risk factor for breast cancer, let alone the leading cause of it.

UNCONSCIOUS INFLUENCES

Apocrine sweat contains proteins with actions similar to pheromones. While we're probably not consciously aware of these odours and what they mean — and we may not even like them — various experiments have shown we may be *unconsciously* aware of them, as the following sweaty T-shirt tests show:

- Women sniffed T-shirts worn by various men who hadn't used antiperspirants or perfumed toiletries. They preferred the odour of those whose immunity profile was different from their own. Children born from such a match would have a better chance of survival than those born from couples with similar immunity profiles.
- Women in the fertile part of their cycle preferred the underarm odour of men who had a high degree of physical symmetry. As well as being considered more beautiful, physical symmetry is a good indicator of fitness, health and fertility in the animal kingdom, and symmetrical individuals tend to be stronger and more sexually successful than their asymmetrical counterparts.
- Gay men preferred the smell of other gay men to that of straight men, while women and straight men liked the smell of gay men least.

So if you find you're attracting the wrong people, it could be your deodorant!

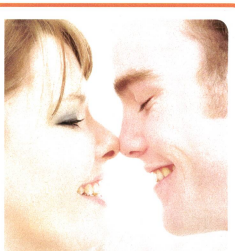
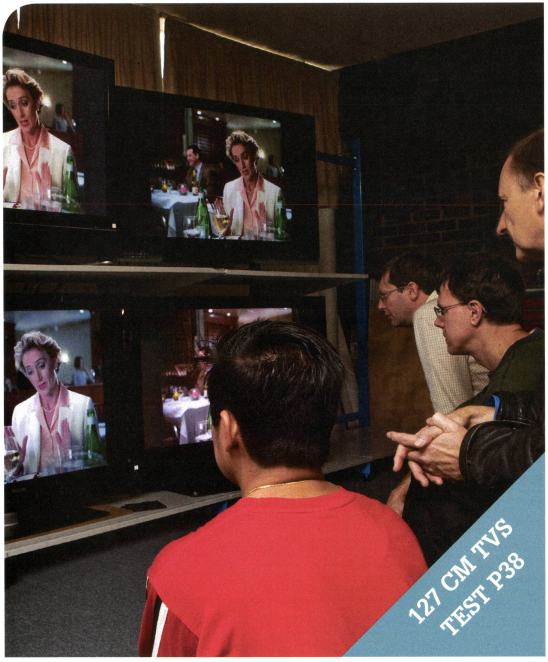


IMAGE: JETOGRAPHOTO

On test

Home entertainment, whitegoods, household and personal appliances — they're all tested here.



Inside

48 **Blu-ray players**

52 **Vacuum cleaners**

60 **Sandwich makers**

Plus

42 **Washing machines**

54 **Kitchen shears**

57 **Portable air conditioners**

CHOICE has its own testing laboratories, where experienced technical staff put products through their paces. We use test methods from Australian standards, as well as developing our own in order to match the way consumers use a product in reality. We buy most of the products we test, to maintain our independence from manufacturers and so that we know what you're faced with in the shops. Our recommendations are based on a product's quality and performance, with no hidden bias.

For more product tests go to choice.com.au

Larger than life

Big screen, big impact, big cost — so what's the best big TV for your money?

nutshell

- Big TVs use lots of power, but LCD screens used less than plasma in this test.
- High resolution doesn't automatically mean a better picture, but it lets you sit closer.
- Out-of-the-box settings usually need to be turned down for comfortable viewing.

Big is the trend in televisions. Major retailers put large TVs upfront in their displays, often showing a colourful video with the settings at maximum brightness and saturation. It's all about trying to stand out on a crowded showroom floor, but it can be overpowering when you get the product home. At this size, picture faults are more obvious and it's even more important to have a natural-looking image than with smaller TVs.

CHOICE bought four 127 cm plasma and four 132 cm LCD TVs for this test. They all have a high-definition (HD) screen and tuner, but the CONIA and NEC models have a lower resolution than the rest (see the table, page 40, for details). These two models are also cheaper, and it shows — neither made it into our *What to buy* list. However, price isn't necessarily an indicator of quality. At $4300, the PHILIPS 52PFL9432D/79 isn't cheap and it didn't perform well either.

How much power do they use?

All the products in this test use less than a watt in standby mode, except the CONIA at 1.6 W. The PIONEER and SONY use about 0.25 W, which is a very good result.

However, TVs of this size use a lot of power while they're running. In both this test and our previous 106 cm TV test, we found LCD TVs use less power per square centimetre of screen than plasmas. So if you want to minimise your impact on the environment and your pocket but still want a big TV, LCD is the way to go.

A TV's settings can have an effect on power consumption too. Most TVs are preset in the factory to give a very bright display. This is done to try to make sure the TV isn't overshadowed by other TVs in a showroom. They can, however, provide a better picture and lower power consumption with some changes to their brightness and contrast settings. Some LCD TVs also allow you to vary the backlight or lamp intensity, which can improve picture and power consumption in some situations.

Up close and viewing

Six of the eight TVs are considered 'full HD', with 1920 x 1080 pixels. The other two are still HD, but at the lower resolution of 1366 x 768 pixels. However, this doesn't tell you much about the TV's ability to produce a good picture.

The number of dots (pixels) on the screen is only an indication of how close you can sit before you start to see them. You also have to take the size of the screen into account — a big screen with the same resolution as a smaller one will have bigger pixels.

As a rule, people with good eyesight won't see pixels on a 127 cm, 1366 x 768 pixel screen when they sit about 3 m from it. A 1920 x 1080 pixel screen of the same size would allow you to sit about 2 m from the screen. However, if you sit about 3 m from the TV screen, the higher resolution alone will have no real benefit.

Before you go shopping, measure the distance between your preferred sitting position and the screen. In the shop, stand about that far from the TV you're interested in buying. Is the TV big enough to give a cinema-like experience? If it's too big it'll force you to move your head to follow the action, which is tiring, and if it's too small it will reduce the impact of the image. >

HOW RELIABLE DO SUBSCRIBERS RATE THEIR BRAND?

Over 8000 subscribers told us about their televisions (bought in or after 2000) in our last reliability survey, and just 6% of them had needed repair in the previous 12 months, making TVs quite a reliable appliance. This means there's not much point paying for that extended warranty you're almost bound to be offered when you're buying a new TV.

The graph shows the results for brands for which we received enough replies to report on (at least 100). The number in brackets is the number of respondents. A difference of 6% or more is meaningful.

PERCENTAGE OF TVS NOT NEEDING REPAIR	%
All televisions (8319)	94
SHARP (381)	98
HITACHI (180)	97
SONY (1184)	97
TOSHIBA (154)	97
PANASONIC (1462)	96
SANYO (171)	96
NEC (358)	95
PALSONIC (144)	95
LG (1302)	94
SAMSUNG (520)	93
PHILIPS (497)	91
TEAC (321)	90
LOEWE (215)	88

What to buy

While the SHARP tested has the same overall score as the LG, the LG's price makes it our Best Buy.

75% SONY KDL52X3100

PRICE $5899

GOOD POINTS

- Very good picture quality — a bit cool, but good blacks.
- Very good sound quality — clean bass and treble, and smooth.
- Remote can also control some other brands of video devices.
- HDMI input at the side as well as at the back.
- USB socket at the side.
- Headphones socket.

BAD POINTS

- One faulty pixel, but it was invisible from normal viewing distance.
- Rear connections are very difficult to reach when the TV is wall-mounted.

70% LG 50PG70FD

PRICE $3499

GOOD POINTS

- Very good picture quality — colours are accurate and good blacks.
- The TV has a setting for reducing or preventing image retention damage to the screen.
- The remote control is easy to use and the onscreen user interface is very good.
- Remote can also control other video devices that are compatible with LG's *Simplink* system and connected via HDMI.
- Swivel screen.
- HDMI input at the side and back.
- USB socket at the side.

BAD POINTS

- High energy use — compared with the other models, it's like adding a 100 W light bulb (or more) to your home energy usage.
- One faulty pixel, but it was invisible from normal viewing distance.
- Rear connections are very difficult to reach when the TV is wall-mounted.

71% PIONEER PDP-LX508A

PRICE $5999

GOOD POINTS

- Very good picture quality — good blacks and the picture appears to have depth, but it lacks brightness.
- Good sound quality.
- Five-year warranty and installation included in the price.
- Easily accessible on/off switch on the TV enables you to save power.
- Has a setting for reducing or preventing image retention damage to the screen.
- Remote can also control some other brands of video devices.
- USB socket at the side.
- Headphones socket.

BAD POINTS

- Three faulty pixels, but they were invisible from normal viewing distance.
- Onboard TV controls aren't easy to get at, and rear connections are very difficult to reach when the TV is wall-mounted.

About the rest

- The SHARP has a good picture, but our testers thought it a little too red. Its onboard controls and connections are difficult to get at, particularly if it's wall-mounted.
- The TOSHIBA has the same issue with onboard controls and connections. Its onscreen menus are easy to use and its picture is good, but a small amount of motion blur is noticeable with fast-moving objects.
- The NEC also has easy-to-use onscreen menus and an on/off switch on the front, so you can easily turn it off to save energy. Static images tend to persist onscreen after only short periods, and it refused to display a 1080p signal from our Blu-ray player. It managed a 1080i signal, though, which is what is normally broadcast on HD TV.
- The PHILIPS picture is a bit cool, with reds appearing a little pink, and it has noticeable banding and motion blur. However, its main problem is its limited angle of view — if you move away from the centre of the screen the image degrades quickly. Also, its sound lacks bass and some of the onboard controls are difficult to use or reach.
- The CONIA's picture has inaccurate colours, lacks depth in its blacks and suffers from very noticeable banding and motion blur. Its sound is poor, with little bass and harsh treble. Even at $1499 it's not a good buy.

More pixels mean higher resolution, but that doesn't tell you much about a TV's ability to produce a good picture.

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE						FEATURES			SPECIFICATIONS	
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Picture quality score (%)	Sound quality score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Energy in use score (%)	Energy consumption when in use (W)	Swivel	Front / rear HDMI inputs	Front / rear USB connection	Display type	Screen size
Sony KDL52X3100	75	82	80	61	68	290		1 / 2	1 / 0	LCD	132 cm (52 in)
Pioneer PDP-LX508A	71	86	70	53	50	382		0 / 3	1 / 0	Plasma	127 cm (50 in)
LG 50PG70FD	70	86	60	66	42	431	√	1 / 3	1 / 0	Plasma	127 cm (50 in)
Sharp LC-52PD7X (A)	70	78	65	58	69	288		0 / 2		LCD	132 cm (52 in)
Toshiba 52X3000A (A)	69	77	60	59	68	288	√	0 / 2		LCD	132 cm (52 in)
NEC PXT-50XD2	59	61	50	62	58	322		0 / 1		Plasma	127 cm (50 in)
Philips 52PFL9432D/79 (A)	55	54	45	57	69	283	√	0 / 3	1 / 0	LCD	132 cm (52 in)
Conia CPDP5003HD (A)	48	54	20	60	54	352		0 / 1		Plasma	127 cm (50 in)

What to look for

ESSENTIAL TV FEATURES

- **Viewing angles** have improved in newer TVs, but some still have a dimmer picture when viewed from different angles, which is important if several people will be watching the TV at once.
- Watch a variety of programs in the shop. Look for **natural skin tones and texture** on a person in a studio setting, such as a news presenter.
- Check the picture for a **colour cast**, such as a pinkish or greenish tinge that can't be fixed by adjusting the controls.
- A **built-in digital tuner** means you don't have to buy a set-top box to receive digital TV. For most people standard definition (SD) or high definition (HD) doesn't matter, as not much HD TV is being broadcast, but there will be more in future. All the tested TVs have an HD screen and tuner.
- Look for a **remote control** that's easy to read, with large, well-spaced buttons and clear labels.
- **Onscreen menus** should be easy to read and understand with out having to resort to the manual.
- If you're likely to lose the remote control, choose a TV with easily accessible **controls on the TV** itself.
- All models in this test are **wall-mountable**. You can have the PIONEER wall-mounted by the installer. The PHILIPS comes with wall mounts, but you have to buy a separate kit for the others.
- A **child lock** enables specific channels to be disabled or locks the onboard buttons.

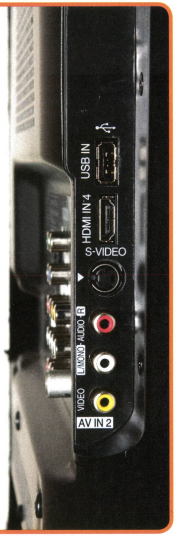
TV CONNECTIONS

- Look for **easy-to-access sockets** that allow you to get to the connections for DVD players, cable TV and so on, particularly if you plan to mount the TV on a wall. Some have additional inputs, usually on one side.

A **USB socket** allows you to display still images or video that you've saved to a USB flash drive.

HDMI (high-definition multimedia interface) is a digital connection for sound and video in one cable. Even if you don't have any gadgets with HDMI output now, expect more devices to use it in future, so it might be worth having at least one HDMI socket on your TV. If you want to use your TV as a computer display, you'll need a DVI input for newer computers or a VGA input for older ones. Or you could use HDMI if your computer has an HDMI output.

Check that the **input connections** on the TV match the output on the devices you want to hook up to it, such as DVD player/recorder, cable TV or PlayStation, and that there are enough connections for all the devices you want to attach at the same time.



Claimed resolution (pixels)	Dimensions (cm, H x W x D)	Contact	Price ($)
1920 x 1080	87 x 141.5 x 38.5	www.sony.com.au	5899
1920 x 1080	79 x 144.5 x 30.5	www.pioneer.com.au	5999
1920 x 1080	85 x 124 x 36.5	www.lge.com.au	3499
1920 x 1080	86.5 x 126 x 31	www.sharp.net.au	6299
1920 x 1080	84 x 128 x 39	www.toshiba.com.au	2199
1366 x 768	92.5 x 122.5 x 32	www.nec.com.au	2499
1920 x 1080	89 x 129 x 33	www.philips.com.au	4300
1366 x 768	89 x 124 x 40	www.conia.com.au	1499

NO PANASONIC OR SAMSUNG?

At the time of testing, neither of these manufacturers had a model that would be available on our publication date, so we'll wait to test their new models as they become available. We'll update the article online and you can also get the latest information at choiceextra.com.au.

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is a combination of:

- Picture quality: 45%
- Sound quality: 20%
- Ease of use: 20%
- Energy in use: 15%

Energy consumption in use The new standard for TV energy when in use measures 'out of the box' settings, so our power consumption figures in the table measure it this way too.
Price Recommended retail price, as of June 2008.

TABLE NOTES

(A) Discontinued, but may still be available in some shops

Check the picture in the shop for 'colour cast', such as a pinkish or greenish tinge that can't be fixed by adjusting the controls.

HOW WE TESTED

Picture quality

- Our testers set up all eight models close together and adjusted their controls to get the best **picture quality** possible. They kept the lighting in the room low and the sound muted, and four experts watched a variety of footage (from movies and live TV) simultaneously on all the tested screens.
- The testers checked how well each TV produces **accurate colour**, using a high-quality monitor as a reference.
- They displayed a number of **test patterns** from a high-quality DVD player, to measure if any of the picture was cut off at the edges and to check for distortions (such as circles that aren't round or wavy lines that should be straight).
- They played **movies** and other footage to check the screen's ability to produce images without colour-banding, jerkiness, blurring, vibration and colours bleeding in high contrast or very intensely saturated parts of the image. They also checked that there were no trails behind fast-moving objects on the screen.

Sound quality They listened to movies and music to check for rattles, hums, hisses or distortion, as well as making a judgment on how well the high and low sounds were produced.

Ease of use They used the remote control, onboard controls and onscreen display to perform a number of common tasks. They looked for clear labelling, buttons and controls that are easily identified and can be used without interfering with other controls, and logical menus. Whether the TV had an inbuilt digital tuner was also included in the ease of use score — they all do.

Energy score Our testers used a power meter to measure the power consumed by the TV when in use and on standby.

No white marks?

CHOICE readers told us some water-saving machines leave detergent residue on clothes — so we looked for a solution.

nutshell

- Water efficiency has its downsides: water-saving machines sometimes leave a residue of 'insolubles' on your clothes. CHOICE has found some ways around the problem.
- Top loaders use more detergent, making their cost per wash higher than front loaders.

We tested 12 new washing machines, priced from $649 to $2199, scoring how well they wash your load and how efficiently they do so — as usual their scores are in the table, page 46. But that's not all we tested this time around. Following reports by concerned readers that their water-efficient washing machines (including the CHOICE recommended model, the FISHER & PAYKEL Aquasmart) left detergent residue on their clothes, we decided to recreate the situation in our labs and try to work out how to deal with it.

The problem appears to come about because some insolubles don't get washed out when used with a water-efficient program. Normal CHOICE tests didn't pick this up because the standard rinse performance test measures the soluble component of detergent that's left in the water after rinsing, not the insolubles. Also, our wash load is made up of white items (to best check the wash performance), which don't show up detergent residue well.

Our testers washed black items in the FISHER & PAYKEL Aquasmart and the MIELE W17120 (which are both very water-efficient models), using various detergents to see which produced the least residue:

- A powder detergent that was a poor performer in our last test.
- A high-performing powder, both new and after being exposed to a humid environment (simulating a packet having been open for a while).
- High-performing, clear top- and front-loading liquid detergents.

Only the clear liquid detergents didn't leave residue on our test load. Alternatively, using half the recommended dose of the high-performance laundry powder, dissolved in warm water before adding, also reduced the problem. CHOICE tests have shown that liquid detergent doesn't wash as well as powders, and it's possible a reduced dose of powder will lower the dirt removal performance. But if your wash load (like most people's) isn't very dirty to start with, these two options are probably your best bets for getting rid of detergent residue with the least compromise of water usage and wash performance.

Our testers also ran the Aquasmart on a 'traditional' wash — which uses twice the amount of water of the high-efficiency wash — and on that wash, no residue was left behind. However, this defeats the purpose of buying a water-saving model in the first place.

FISHER & PAYKEL agreed that using a good-quality clear liquid detergent will reduce residue. It's also found the problem tends to happen with very water-efficient machines, especially in areas with very hard water, or if poor-quality or old detergent is used. It suggested not buying detergent in bulk, because once opened it absorbs moisture, which lowers performance and can cause residue problems. As a last resort, F&P suggests switching to warm water and/or a 'traditional' wash.

Other things that help:

- Store detergent in an airtight container to prevent it becoming clumpy, which can make the problem worse. >

What to buy $

Small (up to 5.5 kg)

MIELE Novotronic W1511 (fr)	$1499
FISHER & PAYKEL MW512 (tp)	$749
FISHER & PAYKEL GW512 (tp)	$859

Medium (6–7 kg)

NEW **ASKO** Quattro W6362 1600rpm (fr)	$2199
NEW **MIELE** W3725 Honeycomb Care (fr)	$1999
NEW **BLANCO** BFW712 (fr)	$899
NEW **BLANCO** BFW716 (fr)	$999
FISHER & PAYKEL GW612 (tp)	$995

Large (7.5 kg or more)

ELECTROLUX Ultra Silencer EWF1495 (fr)	$1689
FISHER & PAYKEL Aquasmart WL80T65CW1 (tp)	$1249
FISHER & PAYKEL Aquasmart WL80T65DW1 (tp)	$1199
LG Inverter WD-1238C (fr)	$999

(fr) = Front loader (tp) = Top loader

What to buy

The four new models that made it into the *What to buy* list are profiled below. For profiles of the other models in the list, see CHOICE, March 2008 or September 2007, or go to choiceextra.com.au and click on those issues under 'Washing machines' in the index.

6–7 kg washing machines

75% ASKO Quattro W6362 1600 rpm

PRICE $2199
SIZE 6 kg
TYPE Front loader

GOOD POINTS

- Very good spin efficiency and good water efficiency.
- Good rinse performance and gentleness.
- A relatively short 'normal' cycle time for a front loader.
- Extra features include: gentle/delicates wash, out-of-balance correction, fast wash for smaller loads, variable spin speed (max. 1600 rpm), time-remaining display, auto-sensor wash, woollens wash, extra rinse option and delay start.
- Outer fold-down door.
- Door automatically opens at the end of the wash (can be deactivated).

BAD POINTS

- If the program time runs longer than a previous wash with the same program, '1' will be displayed until the program is finished — annoying if you're waiting for it and think there's only a minute to go.
- The loudest of all the tested models.

75% MIELE W3725 Honeycomb Care

PRICE $1999
SIZE 6.5 kg
TYPE Front loader

GOOD POINTS

- Very good dirt removal and water efficiency.
- Good gentleness and spin efficiency.
- Extra features include: gentle/delicates wash, out-of-balance correction, fast wash for small loads, variable spin speed (max. 1300 rpm), time-remaining display, auto-sensor wash, woollens wash and extra-rinse option.

BAD POINTS

- Scored only 65% for rinse performance.

73% BLANCO BFW712 / BLANCO BFW716

PRICE $899/$999
SIZE 7 kg
TYPE Front loader

GOOD POINTS

- Very good water efficiency.
- Good spin efficiency and gentle on clothes.
- Extra features include: gentle/delicates wash, out-of-balance correction, fast wash for small loads, variable spin speed (max. 1200 rpm), time-remaining display, 'eco wash', woollens wash, extra-rinse option, delay start and childproof lock.
- The BFW716 has a maximum spin speed of 1600 rpm, which should give better spin efficiency and rinse effectiveness scores.

BAD POINTS

- Scored only 63% for rinse performance.

In a water-efficient machine, clear liquid detergent didn't leave residue on clothes; the two powder detergents tested at full dose did.

About the rest

The table on page 46 gives a summary of performance scores, features and specifications for all the models tested. Here's why the rest of the newly tested models didn't make it into the *What to buy* list. Again, there's a trade-off between good water efficiency and rinse performance — most of the newly tested models are very water-efficient but mediocre at rinsing.

6 KG TO 7 KG

- The AEG ELECTROLUX Lavamat L74800 and ASKO Quattro W6222 1200 rpm scored only 66% and 55% respectively for rinse performance.
- The LG Fuzzy Logic TurboDrum WF-T657's spin efficiency and water efficiency scores are comparatively low and the user manual is confusing.
- The BOSCH Maxx Lifestyle WAE22460AU 1100 rpm scored only 61% for dirt removal.

7.5 KG OR LARGER

- The WHIRPOOL WFS1285AW and MAYTAG MAF8512AAW scored only 55% for rinse performance.
- The INDESIT scored 82% for dirt removal but only 62% for rinse performance.
- The SIMPSON Eziesnsor SWT955SA and ELECTROLUX Water Aid EWT806 8 kg had comparatively low scores for both rinse effectiveness and gentleness.
- The SIMPSON Eziset 750 2ZS750M scored less than 70% for dirt removal, rinse performance, gentleness and spin efficiency.

- Try putting the residue-affected clothes in a dryer on the 'air-dry' setting (that is, without heat, just using the fan) for five minutes. Some people have found it helps 'knock off' the residue.

Testing for water efficiency

It's clear the trade-off for better water efficiency in a washing machine is often rinse performance. As a further check, three machines claiming to save water — the ELECTROLUX Water Aid EWT806, SIMPSON Ezisensor SWT955SA and SIMPSON Eziset 750 22S750M — were tested to the CHOICE test method on a 'normal' wash, then using their water-saving option.

In water-saving mode, their rinse performance score dropped by at least 20% for all three models but, of course, all their water efficiency scores increased. In the table, their scores in water-saving mode are shown. >

FOR PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY

An occupational therapist from the Independent Living Centre (NSW) assessed the newly tested washing machines. Unfortunately none of their recommended models is in the *What to buy* list.

- If you're in a wheelchair or have back pain, a front-loading machine elevated off the floor will be the easiest for you to use. The LG Fuzzy Logic TurboDrum WF-T657 rated highest for ease of reaching into the machine, lifting the lid and accessing the controls.
- If you have upper limb dysfunction or weakness, the ELECTROLUX Water Aid EWT806, SIMPSON Ezisensor SWT955SA, LG Fuzzy Logic TurboDrum WF-T657 and SIMPSON Eziset 750 22S750M are recommended, as they're easy to open and reach into, and the controls/dispensers are easy to operate.
- Machines that can be preset and activated with just one or two actions are best for those with a cognitive impairment. The ELECTROLUX Water Aid EWT806, LG Fuzzy Logic TurboDrum WF-T657, SIMPSON Ezisensor SWT955SA and SIMPSON Eziset 750 22S750M are the best.
- None of the newly tested machines is particularly good for those with vision impairment, as they don't have suitable colour contrasts and lack auditory feedback.

For the water efficiency score, testers measure the amount of water used in a wash cycle per kilogram of clothes.

HOW WE TESTED

Dirt removal To see how much dirt the machines removed, our testers pinned specially soiled swatches onto a standard load of washing and measured how much light was reflected from them before and after washing in cold water and a standard detergent. The more light, the cleaner the machine has washed the swatch.

Rinse performance is how well the machines rinse out the soluble components of the detergent. To measure it, our testers added a marker chemical to the wash. At the end, they took a sample of the water remaining in the clothes to determine the amount of chemical left: the less there was, the better the rinse.

Gentleness Testers attached swatches of easily frayed fabric to the washing and measured the unfrayed area before and after the wash.

Spin efficiency They weighed the clothes before and after the wash to see how much water was left in them.

Water efficiency Testers measured the amount of water used in a cycle (on a 'normal' wash program). The score is based on how much water was used for each kilogram of washing — the less the better.

Detergent residue See page 42 for a description of this test and its results.

What to look for

USEFUL WASHING MACHINE FEATURES

- **Out-of-balance correction** Automatically detects and redistributes an out-of-balance load, either by spinning slowly before the full spin cycle or by taking in more water (which is what most top loaders do). If you're concerned about high water usage, opt for a machine without this feature or go for a front loader.
- **Auto-sensing water level** This can help you save water, energy and time by automatically adjusting the water level according to the load and/or fabric type. Some machines also adjust the washing action.

Selectable spin speed This means you can change the spin speed on some programs. A higher spin speed will result in drier clothes, while a lower speed is better for delicates or fabrics that are easily creased.

For full information on what to look for when buying a washing machine, see CHOICE, March 2007, or go to choiceextra.com.au and click on that issue in the index under 'Washing machines'. Some features listed in the table (page 48) are explained here.

HOW RELIABLE HAVE SUBSCRIBERS FOUND THEM?

In our latest reliability survey subscribers told us whether their washing machine (bought in or after 2000) had needed repair in the previous 12 months. While more subscribers now own a front loader, our survey found no significant difference in reliability between the two types. Overall 10% had needed repair. The most commonly reported problem was the machine going out of balance.

Owners of MIELE, BOSCH and FISHER & PAYKEL washers were more likely to buy the same brand again, while significantly fewer would repurchase a WHIRLPOOL, LG, MAYTAG or ARISTON machine. And of those who wouldn't buy ARISTON again, 29% said it "breaks down too often".

Differences of 9% or more between brands are meaningful. The numbers in brackets are the number of responses we received for each brand.

PERCENTAGE NOT NEEDING REPAIR	%
All washing machines (7000)	**90**
BOSCH (328)	97
MIELE (432)	95
SAMSUNG (237)	92
SIMPSON (754)	92
FISHER & PAYKEL (1805)	90
WESTINGHOUSE (260)	89
ASKO (296)	88
WHIRLPOOL (697)	88
LG (698)	87
MAYTAG (207)	85
KLEENMAID (130)	83
ARISTON (127)	77

MODELS ON THE WAY OUT

Five models formerly in the *What to buy* list have been discontinued and could be a great bargain if you find them reduced in a runout sale:

- BOSCH Maxx Lifestyle Exclusive WAE26470 (fr), 7 kg, $1599, overall score 76%
- FISHER & PAYKEL WH70F60W1 (fr), 7 kg, $1049, 76%
- FISHER & PAYKEL Intuitive Eco IW7112 (tp), 7 kg, $1149, 73%
- FISHER & PAYKEL Intuitive Eco IW812 (tp), 8 kg, $1179, 74%
- LG WD-1049C (fr), 7.5 kg, $849, 74%

Other discontinued models you might see in shops are:

- SAMSUNG J1045 (fr), 7 kg, $749, 73%
- SAMSUNG J845 (fr), 7 kg, $899, 72%
- SAMSUNG Silver Nano J1455AV (fr), 7.5 kg, $1199, 73%
- HAIER HWM90DD (tp), 9 kg, $1499, 69%

PRODUCT		PERFORMANCE									FEATURES			
Brand / model (in rank order within groups)	Type	Overall score (%)	Dirt removal score (%)	Rinse performance score (%)	Gentleness score (%)	Spin efficiency score (%)	Water efficiency score (%)	Water used (L, 'normal' wash)	Cycle time (minutes, 'normal' wash)	Noise (dB)	Gentle / delicates cycle	Woollens cycle (machine / handwashable)	Out-of-balance correction	Selectable spin speed
UP TO 5.5 KG														
Miele Novotronic W1511	Front	75 (B)	84	62	76	71	83	47	112	61	√	√ / √	√	√
Fisher & Paykel MW512	Top / agitator	72	79	90	53	69	52	132	44	69	√	√ / –	√	√
Fisher & Paykel GW512	Top / agitator	71	77	90	52	69	53	131	45	67	√	√ / –	√	√
Simpson Eziset 36S550M	Top / agitator	68	70	83	56	61	58	115	49	60	√	√ / –	ns	
Simpson Eziloader 45S558E	Front	63	64	49	78	45	78	62	66	60	√	√ / –	√	√
6 KG TO 7 KG														
# **Asko** Quattro W6362 1600 rpm	Front	75	71	74	75	82	79	64	81	72	√	√ / √	√	√
# **Miele** Honeycomb Care W3725	Front	75 (B)	81	65	76	79	85	50	112	64	√	√ / √	√	√
# **Blanco** BFW712	Front	73	75	63	75	73	82	61	104	62	√	√ / √	√	√
# **Blanco** BFW716	Front	73	75	63	75	73	82	61	104	62	√	√ / √	√	√
Fisher & Paykel GW612	Top / agitator	73	83	91	48	69	52	157	47	69	√	√ / –	√	√
# **AEG Electrolux** Lavamat L74800	Front	72 (B)	74	66	76	76	83	60	108	71	√	√ / √	√	√
Asko Quattro W6342	Front	72	72	57	78	74	83	53	86	69	√	√ / √	√	√
Miele Honeycomb Care W1712	Front	72 (B)	81	55	73	70	85	51	113	63	√	√ / √	√	√
AEG L62800	Front	71 (B)	75	58	79	71	83	61	108	64	√	√ / √	√	√
# **Asko** Quattro W6222 1200 rpm	Front	71	72	55	76	70	83	52	101	69	√	√ / √	√	√
Fisher & Paykel Aquasmart WL70T60C	Top / impeller	71	80	58	57	67	81	66	58	57	√	√ / –	√	√
Fisher & Paykel Aquasmart WL70T60D	Top / impeller	71	80	58	57	67	81	66	58	57	√	√ / –	√	√
# **LG** Fuzzy Logic TurboDrum WF-T657	Top / impeller	70	78	88	56	50	49	164	68	60	√	√ / –	ns	√
# **Bosch** Maxx Lifestyle WAE22460AU 1100 rpm (A)	Front	69	61	68	79	72	82	64	77	66	√	√ / √	√	√
Electrolux Eco Valve EWF1087	Front	69	74	45	77	63	83	61	137	62	√	√ / –	√	√
Simpson Eziloader 45S710E	Front	69	74	45	77	63	83	61	137	62	√	√ / –	√	√
7.5 KG OR LARGER														
Electrolux Ultra Silencer EWF1495	Front	80	82	80	75	81	82	73	108	60	√	√ / √	√	√
Fisher & Paykel Aquasmart WL80T65CW1	Top / impeller	75	81	74	58	74	81	76	58	63	√	√ / –	√	√
Fisher & Paykel Aquasmart WL80T65DW1	Top / impeller	75	81	74	58	74	81	76	58	63	√	√ / –	√	√
LG Inverter WD-1238C	Front	74 (B)	78	64	78	75	82	67	87	63	√	√ / –	√	√
Bosch Logixx 8 WAS32740AU	Front	73	74	55	77	80	84	62	87	63	√	√ / √	√	√
Whirlpool WFS1273AW	Front	73 (B)	80	55	77	74	84	60	144	65	√	√ / √	√	√
# **Maytag** MAF8512AAW	Front	72	73	55	77	75	83	73	164	65	√	√ / –	ns	√
# **Whirlpool** WFS1285AW	Front	72	73	55	77	75	83	73	164	65	√	√ / –	ns	√
Whirlpool 6ALSQ8000MW3	Top / agitator	71	78	86	55	53	58	157	47	62	√	√ / –		
Whirlpool 6ALSR7244MW3	Top / agitator	71	78	86	55	53	58	157	47	62	√	√ / –		
Whirlpool WFS1071AW-7.5 kg Antibacterial	Front	70 (B)	77	52	76	69	84	59	145	66	√	√ / √	√	
Whirlpool WFS1072AW	Front	70 (B)	77	52	76	69	84	59	145	66	√	√ / √	√	
Ariston Aqualtis AQXXD 149H	Front	69	71	46	74	78	86	58	116	65	√	√ / √	√	√
# **Indesit** Moon Smart Solutions SIXL126	Front	67 (B)	82	66	76	71	86	54	170	67	√	√ / –	√	
# **Simpson** Ezisensor SWT955SA	Top / agitator	66	73	55	51	64	81	92	74	66	√	√ / –	√	
# **Electrolux** Water Aid EWT806 8 kg	Top / agitator	65	76	46	49	62	80	79	72	67	√	√ / –	ns	√
# **Simpson** Eziset 750 22S750M	Top / agitator	64	62	65	62	66	70	113	59	66	√	√ / –	ns	

SPECIFICATIONS					COSTS			
Tap connection	Coldest wash temperature for 'normal wash (°C)*	Capacity (kg)	Claimed dimensions (cm, H x W x D)	Contact	Cost per wash inc. premium detergent, water and energy (cents / wash)**	Cost per wash inc. budget detergent, water and energy (cents / wash)†	Running costs, water and energy ($ / 10 years)	Price ($)
C only	30	5.5	86 x 60 x 64	www.miele.com.au	57	22	303	1499
H & C, C	Cold	5.5	105 x 56 x 56	www.fp.com.au	74	43	570	749
H & C, C	Cold	5.5	105 x 56 x 56	www.fp.com.au	73	42	554	859
H & C	Cold	5.5	115 x 60 x 64	www.simpson.com.au	72	41	503	669
C only	Cold	5.5	85 x 60 x 63	www.simpson.com.au	57	22	277	689
ns	Cold	6	85 x 60 x 59	www.asko.com.au	57	22	302	2199
C only	30	6.5	85 x 60 x 58	www.miele.com.au	59	24	347	1999
H & C	Cold	7	84 x 60 x 59	www.blanco-australia.com	58	23	332	899
H & C	Cold	7	84 x 60 x 59	www.blanco-australia.com	58	23	332	999
H & C, C	Cold	6.5	105 x 60 x 60	www.fp.com.au	76	45	674	995
C only	30	7	85 x 60 x 64	www.andico.com.au	60	25	395	1799
C only	Cold	6	85 x 60 x 59	www.asko.com.au	57	22	279	1799
C only	30	6.5	86 x 60 x 64	www.miele.com.au	58	23	318	1799
C only	30	7	85 x 60 x 64	www.andico.com.au	60	25	384	1599
ns	Cold	6	85 x 60 x 59	www.asko.com.au	57	22	304	1799
H & C	Cold	7	102 x 60 x 60	www.fp.com.au	68	37	350	1149
H & C	Cold	7	102 x 60 x 60	www.fp.com.au	68	37	350	1099
H & C	Cold	6.5	93 x 59 x 61	www.lge.com.au	77	46	696	649
C only	Cold	7	85 x 60 x 59	www.boschappliances.com.au	58	23	329	1399
C only	Cold	7	85 x 60 x 63	www.electrolux.com.au	58	23	343	949
C only	Cold	7	85 x 60 x 63	www.simpson.com.au	58	23	343	849
C only	Cold	8	85 x 60 x 60	www.electrolux.com.au	60	25	417	1689
H & C	Cold	8	105 x 65 x 65	www.fp.com.au	69	38	385	1249
H & C	Cold	8	105 x 65 x 65	www.fp.com.au	69	38	385	1199
H & C	30	7.5	85 x 60 x 55	www.lge.com.au	62	27	467	999
C only	Cold	8	85 x 60 x 59	www.boschappliances.com.au	58	23	337	2249
H & C	30	7.5	85 x 60 x 59	www.whirlpool.com.au	63	28	516	1099
H & C	Cold	8.5	85 x 60 x 60	www.maytag.com.au	61	26	430	1899
H & C	Cold	8.5	85 x 60 x 60	www.whirlpool.com.au	61	26	430	1499
H & C	Cold	7.5	109 x 69 x 68	www.whirlpool.com.au	88	57	1084	999
H & C	Cold	7.5	109 x 69 x 68	www.whirlpool.com.au	88	57	1084	949
H & C	30	7.5	86 x 63 x 65	www.whirlpool.com.au	64	29	537	879
H & C	30	7.5	86 x 63 x 65	www.whirlpool.com.au	64	29	537	979
H & C	Cold	8.5	105 x 60 x 65	www.aristonchannel.com	59	24	351	2199
C only	60	7.5	85 x 60 x 54	www.aristonchannel.com	78	43	1060	1199
H & C	Cold	9.5	108 x 67 x 75	www.simpson.com.au	74	43	568	1269
H & C	Cold	8	107 x 67 x 72	www.electrolux.com.au	72	41	504	1159
H & C	Cold	7.5	106 x 68 x 75	www.simpson.com.au	78	47	748	899

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Dirt removal: 40%
- Rinse performance: 20%
- Gentleness: 15%
- Water efficiency: 15%
- Spin efficiency: 10%

Cold wash penalty As the majority of Australians now wash in cold water straight from the tap, we've applied a small penalty in our overall score to models that can't do a proper cold wash (about 20°C) on their 'normal' cycle. While the higher wash temperature might slightly increase a machine's scores for dirt removal and rinse effectiveness, it also means it's using more electricity than it would if it were able to do a true 'cold' wash; our penalty compensates for this.

Dirt removal The machine we use to measure this (a spectrophotometer) is more accurate than the human eye: differences of about 6% are visible.

Features See *What to look for*, page 45.

Tap connection Some machines need both hot and cold water to operate; others can connect to cold water only and might need a special connector or sealing cap for the hot-water inlet. A machine with a heater (front loaders only) can be particularly useful if you connect to cold only, as it still gives you the option of a warm wash.

Cost per wash including detergent We compared the costs of using a premium and a budget detergent, plus water and energy, for each machine. Top loaders tend to use more detergent and are more expensive in use than front loaders.

Running costs This is an estimate of how much it'll cost for water and electricity over 10 years if you wash the equivalent of one load every day using a 'normal' cycle, based on 15 cents per kWh of electricity and $1 per 1000 L for water, and including any electricity used when the machine's connected to a power source but not in use. It doesn't include detergent.

Price Recommended or average retail, as of June 2008.

TABLE NOTES

 # Newly tested models.

[Indicates similar models.

ns Not stated.

** Cold = cold tap water.*

*** Based on the cost per wash of Omo Matic & Omo High Performance, both powder concentrates, from our last laundry detergent test. Front loader = 49 cents, top loader = 58 cents.*

† Based on the cost per wash of Trimat Advanced powder concentrate, from our last laundry detergent test. Front loader = 14 cents, top loader = 27 cents.

(A) This machine was also tested using the 'intensive' option, which the manufacturer recommends when washing a full load, such as our test load. While using this option increases the machine's performance, it also significantly increases the run time.

(B) A penalty has been applied because the machine can't do a cold wash (see Using the table, *above).*

Will Blu-ray replace DVDs?

We've avoided another VHS/Beta format war, with only one high-definition disc format now available. But should you go Blu-ray just yet?

nutshell

- Prices for Blu-ray players should drop dramatically over the coming months.
- The move from DVD to Blu-ray isn't as dramatic an improvement in quality as the move from VHS videotape to DVD was, and the take-up of the new technology is likely to be slower as a result.

The arrival of the DVD over a decade ago heralded a new age in home entertainment and marked the beginning of the end for the VHS videotape. Now we're being told DVD is no longer good enough for the 21st century and we need high-definition (HD) digital video on Blu-ray to truly enjoy video in the home.

CHOICE looked at a range of Blu-ray players to see if their performance lives up to the hype.

Blu-ray for beginners

Blu-ray is a disc format that delivers video at a higher resolution than DVD. Initially there was a tussle between companies, led by Sony supporting Blu-ray, and the competing format of HD-DVD backed by Toshiba and other companies. Thankfully this war was short-lived and didn't cause the same amount of trauma for consumers as the legendary VHS/Beta tape battle of the 1980s. Now it's Blu-ray or nothing for HD video on disc.

The Blu-ray disc looks very similar to a standard DVD, but the disc capacity is up to 10 times higher, which means you can fit a lot more video on each disc, as well as interactive games and other content. While you may think the video quality from a DVD movie is as good as it gets at home, when seen on a TV that can support higher resolutions (such as 1080p or 1080i), the difference between DVD and Blu-ray is noticeable.

The additional space also allows for multiple streams of audio, to suit a variety of home theatre systems, though most home users will be happy with the standard Dolby 5.1 surround sound that's already available on most DVD titles.

You can't play a Blu-ray disc in a DVD player but you can play a DVD in a Blu-ray player. However, none of the Blu-ray players we tested could play VideoCD (VCD) titles.

On the audio side, all the models can play standard audio CDs, while the SONY PS3 can also play discs with MP3 audio files. >

What to buy

PANASONIC DMP-BD30	$769
SONY PlayStation 3	$699
	(plus $50 for remote control)

What's the difference?

These two models were both noticeably better than the others at 'upscaling' DVDs (showing standard DVDs in an 'enhanced video' mode) and dealing with damaged discs. However, they offer two quite different options:

SONY PS3 includes a 40 GB hard disc drive and a Blu-ray player, and can stand vertically or horizontally. It doesn't have an onboard display or most of the onboard controls common to other players, has fewer output connections and the remote control is an optional extra.

It has the best start-up and disc recognition times when playing a Blu-ray disc and is very good at upscaling the video resolution on a DVD movie. It's also well priced (even with the additional $50 for a remote control) compared with the other models tested. And it's future-proof, with the simplest upgrading process to enable additional features and functionality.

The PS3 is of course also a games console, which means it can play video game discs specially made for the PS3 platform. These Blu-ray games discs can only be used on the PS3. The current PS3 doesn't support PlayStation 2 (PS2) DVD-based game discs, but has no problem playing DVD movie discs.

PANASONIC DMP-BD30 If you don't want a games console in your lounge room — you might find the lack of onboard controls and sparse front panel display difficult to use — the PANASONIC is a good option for a first foray into the world of Blu-ray. It's easier to use as a Blu-ray player, handles damaged DVDs well and has excellent standby energy consumption.

CHOICE verdict

As with most new technologies, early adopters of Blu-ray will find the choice of titles at the local video rental store limited. And Blu-ray players are still significantly more expensive than DVD players, but prices are expected to drop over the coming months.

Lack of titles and high prices are nothing new when a new technology is introduced. DVD overcame similar problems when competing against VHS tapes, and likewise CDs when they were introduced to replace vinyl records. The difference in this case is that maybe the biggest hurdle for Blu-ray to overcome in gaining widespread appeal is that, according to some analysts, most people are satisfied with the video and audio quality of DVD and don't see a compelling reason to change.

More affordable Blu-ray players should be arriving over the next few months and movie enthusiasts will no doubt extol the virtues of the fantastic picture quality of their new Blu-ray blockbuster on an HD-quality TV, which is undeniable. However, DVD is likely to remain a major force in most lounge rooms for years to come.

What to look for

BLU-RAY FEATURES

- **DVD upscaling** allows you to view your current DVD titles in an 'enhanced video' mode, where the picture is interpolated to either 1080i or 1080p, so your DVD movie looks 'almost' high definition. However, you need an HDMI connection and a TV that can display HD to enjoy the benefits. (1080 is the number of lines the TV uses to display the picture, and is regarded as high-resolution/high-definition. The 'i' and 'p' denote different ways of displaying those lines.)
- **Internet connection** delivers a range of features, but not all are available on every model. Some use the internet connection to upgrade the firmware (operating software) of the player via the internet, giving you added features and functionality. Online interactivity, where a Blu-ray movie disc might offer added features, games or additional content can also be accessed through the internet. However the Blu-ray player needs to have Profile 2.0 or BD live (see *Jargon buster*, page 51).
- **Toslink** provides a digital audio connection and is a good option if you're unable to use HDMI to connect your Blu-ray player to your home theatre system. However, while Toslink supports most digital audio formats, it doesn't support lossless audio formats such as Dolby TrueHD and DTS HD Master audio signals.

Remote control It should have buttons that are sized, shaped and spaced so you can easily find and press them individually. They should be grouped so you can quickly go to specific functions, and the most commonly used buttons should be prominent.

GETTING CONNECTED

Your Blu-ray player needs the best possible video connection to enjoy the full benefits. The following connection options are all able to show a Blu-ray movie, but if your TV can't handle at least a component connection, there will be no difference in video quality using Blu-ray over a standard DVD player.

HDMI (high-definition multimedia interface) is a digital connection for both video and sound in one cable, with the latest version being 1.3. HDMI is also the only connection that can accommodate the upscaling of video to a higher resolution.
DVI (digital video interface) can carry digital video signals at the same video quality as HDMI, but no audio.

Composite is found on most modern TVs and uses a single yellow RCA connector.

Component provides up to 1080i video quality resolution if the TV can display it. Three video cables are required to show the video, and you need a separate cable for sound.

Regions support If you play DVDs from regions other than Australia, look for a player that supports multi-region playback. The PANASONIC and PIONEER are the only tested players that support playback of DVDs from all regions, 1 through 6. Blu-ray region coding is different: it's covered by three regions designated A, B and C. Australia is part of region B, which includes Europe, Africa and the Middle East.

S-video is a step up from composite and is identifiable by a small, round, four-pin plug.

The biggest hurdle for Blu-ray is that most people are satisfied with the quality of DVDs and don't see a compelling reason to change.

Profiles

79% PANASONIC DMP-BD30

PRICE $769

GOOD POINTS

- Relatively easy to use.
- SD card reader.
- Plays all DVD regions.
- Very good upscaling of DVD movies (see *What to look for*, page 49, for an explanation).
- Plays MP3 files.

BAD POINTS

- No internet connection.
- You can't upgrade the profile to version 2.0 (see *Jargon buster*, far right).

72% SONY PlayStation 3

PRICE $699 (plus $50 for remote control)

GOOD POINTS

- Very good versatility as it's a games console, not just a Blu-ray disc (BD) player.
- Very good upscaling of DVD movies.
- Can play content from some other networked devices.
- Inbuilt wireless networking.
- Has a physical power switch so you can switch it totally off (not just to standby).
- Plays MP3 files.

BAD POINTS

- Limited output connections.
- Won't play DVD regions 1, 5, or 6.
- The onscreen display doesn't have good prompts as to which keys to press.
- No playback keys on the player itself.
- No front panel display.

About the rest

- The SONY BDP-S500B is reasonably easy to use and good at upscaling, but the PANASONIC model performs better across the board and is cheaper.
- The PIONEER BDP-LX70A is a solidly built machine, but it's very expensive while only an average performer.
- The SHARP BD-HP20X may seem like a good low-budget option, but if you have an existing DVD collection you may encounter problems playing titles with even the slightest scratch or mark.

BLU-RAY HOME THEATRE

CHOICE also tested the recently released SAMSUNG HT-BD2, which is not only a Blu-ray player but a complete Blu-ray home theatre system, incorporating a player, amplifier and 7.1 speaker system. As a player it's OK, but isn't in our *What to buy* list. A full review of how it rated as a home theatre system is on page 9.

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE						FEATURES				
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Start-up and disc recognition score (%)	DVD upscaling score (%)	Damaged DVD playback score (%)	Standby energy score (%)	Blu-ray profile	Internet connection	Firmware upgrade	Profile upgrade	Digital audio (Toslink) output
Panasonic DMP-BD30	79	67	70	85	97	100	1.1		Via CD		√
Sony PlayStation 3 (A)	72	41	95	80	97	80	2.0	√	Via internet	√	√
Sony BDP-S500B	63	68	49	70	35	100	1.0		Via CD		√
Pioneer BDP-LX70A (B)	62	69	49	70	30	100	1.0	√	Via internet		√
Sharp BD-HP20X	55	61	52	70	0	90	1.0		Via USB		√

HOW WE TESTED

Ease of use Our tester assessed the onscreen user interface, remote control and onboard controls, to see how well they perform in real-world situations.

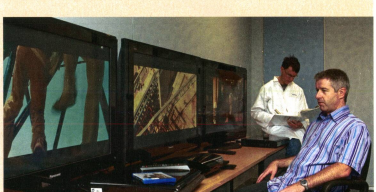
Start-up and disc recognition He measured the time taken for the player to start from standby mode, and also how long it took to recognise and start playback of both a DVD and a Blu-ray movie.

DVD upscaling A panel of three experienced viewers compared the picture quality and performance of the models using three plasma TVs of the same make and model that had been calibrated to matching picture settings. The players were connected to the TVs using HDMI cables and played scenes from both DVDs (upscaled to 1080p) and Blu-ray discs (BD) to assess clarity and definition, colour and motion.

Damaged DVD playback The tester used a professional test DVD with interruptions in the data layer to replicate a DVD with scratches/dust/dirt/fingerprints, etc.

He also attempted to play back standard audio and MP3 CDs, DVDs with various region codes, and different types of recordable DVDs. None of the models tested could play a VCD (video CD) or Super VCD (SVCD).

Standby energy consumption was measured by connecting the player to a regulated power supply, switching it to standby mode and measuring energy consumption over a set period.



Early adopters of Blu-ray will find the choice of titles at the local video rental store quite limited.

Jargonbuster @*!?

Profiles All Blu-ray players operate on one of three profiles, with functionality and support for extra features determined by the profile number.

- The very first players support **Blu-ray Profile 1.0 (Basic)** which means they'll play a Blu-ray movie in all its HD glory, but you won't be able to enjoy some of the extra features, such as picture in picture (PiP) or any available interactive content.
- **Profile 1.1 (Bonus View)** requires the player to be capable of accessing at least 256 MB of memory. These players support PiP as well as Virtual Package, which shows extra content such as games, trailers and interactive content by loading files from the Blu-ray disc into the players' memory.
- The **BD-Live (2.0)** profile requires the player to be capable of supporting at least 1 GB of memory. For both Bonus View and BD-Live this can be done with either built-in memory or with user-provided memory, such as a memory card or a USB flash drive.
- The main difference between a Profile 1.1 machine and a Profile 2.0 machine is access to the internet for interactivity.

SPECIFICATIONS

Dimensions (cm, H x W x D)	Weight (kg)	Contact	Price ($)
6 x 43 x 32	3.3	www.panasonic.com.au	769
32.5 x 27.5 x 10	4.4	www.playstation.com.au	699
10 x 43 x 36	4.8	www.sony.com.au	999
10.5 x 42 x 36	6.5	www.pioneer.com.au	1799
7 x 43.5 x 34	3.9	www.sharp.net.au	749

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Ease of use: 35%
- Start-up and disc recognition time: 20%
- DVD upscaling: 20%
- Damaged DVD playback: 15%
- Standby energy consumption: 10%

A Blu-ray playback score isn't included, as scores were identical for all players in the test — all returned excellent results.

Features See *What to look for*, page 49.

Price Recommended retail, as of June 2008.

TABLE NOTES

(A) Tested with optional PS3 Blu-ray Disc remote control ($50).
(B) Discontinued, but may still be available in some shops.

Good-value vacuums

We rate medium-priced vacs against expensive models, and they perform just as well.

nutshell

- Why pay more? These mid-priced vacuum cleaners performed just as well as many higher-priced models in previous tests.
- If your vacuum uses bags, you need to factor in the additional cost of buying them.

Our latest test has 14 medium-priced vacuum cleaners, ranging from $230 to $399. These mid-priced vacs performed very well and most matched up to their more expensive comrades. There's no need to spend more than $350 to get a good, easy-to-use cleaner. And none of the models left scratch marks on wooden floors.

How green are those bags?

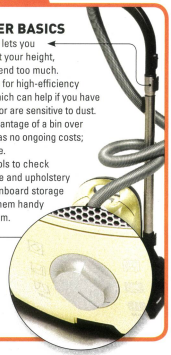
Only four of the models tested use a bag. The BOSCH, ELECTROLUX Airmax and the HOOVER TFS5196 013 use paper bags, but the manufacturers didn't confirm whether they're recyclable. If you want to recycle your paper vacuum bags you need to make sure they're 100% paper. One bag that doesn't appear to be recyclable is the MIELE's. Made out of a combination of microfibre and hard plastic, it's claimed to enclose dust better.

Of course you have to empty the bag before you recycle it. Did you know that worm farms love dust, hair and other particles from your vacuum cleaner? If you don't have a worm farm, a compost bin will do just as well. The other 10 models on test don't use a bag — they have a bin that can be emptied directly into your compost or worm farm. ■

What to look for

VACUUM CLEANER BASICS

- **Telescopic wand** This lets you adjust the wand to suit your height, so you don't have to bend too much.
- **HEPA filter** This stands for high-efficiency particulate air filter, which can help if you have asthma, a dust allergy or are sensitive to dust.
- **Dust collector** The advantage of a bin over a paper bag is that it has no ongoing costs; cloth bags are reusable.
- **Tools** The standard tools to check for are dusting, crevice and upholstery brushes, and having onboard storage for all of them keeps them handy for when you need them.



Variable suction/power
This allows you to lower the suction for delicate jobs, such as cleaning curtains.

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE						FEATURES					SPECIFICATIONS		
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (%) *	Dirt removal score from carpet (%) *	Scratch test score (%)	Cleaning corners and edges score (%) *	Ease of use score (%)	Noise (dB)	Dust collector	Crevice / upholstery tool / dusting brush	Onboard storage	Wand suction control	Variable power	HEPA filter	Measured power (W)	Reach from power point (m)	Weight (kg)
Bosch Formula Pro Silence BSG71866	78	70	100	70	83	62	Bag	✓/✓/✓	✓		✓	✓	1470	10.0	6.9
Miele S4211	78	68	100	70	83	67	Bag	✓/✓/✓	✓	✓	✓		1780	8.6	6.6
Samsung Twin Chamber System SC6591	75 / 78	60 / 68	100	70 / 70	85	69	Bin	✓/✓/✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	1660	8.7	6.9
Nilfisk Combat 12404605	73 / 73	60 / 58	100	72 / 80	78	71	Bin	✓/–/✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	1720	9.5	7.4
Vax Absolute VZ-702	72	61	100	70	75	73	Bin	✓/–/✓	✓	✓		✓	1370	11.2	9.1
Volta Tornado Power U4501P	72	57	100	78	80	68	Bin	✓/✓/✓	✓ (B)	✓		✓	1460	8.9	7.2
LG Cyking V-CC202NTU	71 / 75	59 / 68	100	69 / 64	75	71	Bin	✓/✓/✓		✓		✓	1620	8.5	7.3
Electrolux Accelerator ZAC6717 (A)	70	54	100	75	77	68	Bin	✓/✓/–	✓	✓		✓	1310	8.8	7.0
Electrolux Airmax ZAM6103	70	56	100	80	72	69	Bag	✓/✓/–	✓	✓	✓	✓	1390	8.7	6.1
Kambrook Jaguar Twister KBV40	70	56	100	75	73	73	Bin	✓/✓/✓		✓	✓	✓	1720	9.8	7.8
Hoover Freespace Nanopack TFS5196 013	68	54	100	74	72	72	Bag	✓/–/✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	1670	7.2	5.9
Panasonic Reel Clean MC-CL671	68	53	100	79	72	73	Bin	✓/✓/–	✓	✓	✓		1740	9.2	7.4
Wertheim Core Bagless ZW05019	67	43	100	76	83	69	Bin	✓/✓/✓	✓	✓		✓	1440	11.1	8.7
Hoover Freespace Nanopack TFS7184 013	61	41	100	74	68	70	Bin	✓/–/✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	1430	7.2	6.0

What to buy

78% BOSCH Formula Pro Silence BSG71866

PRICE $349

GOOD POINTS
- Best for dirt pickup from carpet.
- Variable power.
- Can be used with optional cloth bag.
- HEPA filter.
- Excellent reach from the power point.
- Quietest model in this test.
- Telescopic wand is a good length.

BAD POINTS
- Nothing in particular.

75% SAMSUNG Twin Chamber System SC6591

PRICE $299

GOOD POINTS
- Variable power.
- HEPA filter.
- Very good reach from the power point.
- Telescopic wand is a good length.
- Excellent controls located on the wand.

BAD POINTS
- Nothing in particular.

78% MIELE S4211

PRICE $349

GOOD POINTS
- Variable power.
- Very good reach from the power point.
- Telescopic wand is a good length.

BAD POINTS
- Bags are expensive and not recyclable.

Some HEPA filters can be washed, but on other machines you have to replace it about once a year at a cost of $50 or so.

About the rest

- Our tester discovered a number of models that emitted a high-pitched noise when in use — the culprits were both HOOVERs, the PANASONIC, NILFISK, VAX and KAMBROOK.
- Both HOOVERs, the PANASONIC and KAMBROOK have telescopic wands on the short side.
- Lack of onboard storage for accessories is an issue for the KAMBROOK and LG while the VOLTA Tornado can only hold two at a time.
- Neither ELECTROLUX has a dusting brush and nor does the PANASONIC, while the VAX, HOOVER and NILFISK have no upholstery tool.
- The HOOVER Freespace Nanopack TFS5196 bag is fiddly to change.
- The VAX is heavy.
- The LG was priced at $375 when we bought it in May 2008; it's now $599, which doesn't count as 'mid-priced' but we've still printed the results.

Cost of bags ($)**	Price ($)
www.boschappliances.com.au	15	349
www.miele.com.au	22	349
www.samsung.com.au	na	299
www.nilfisk-advance.com.au	na	299
www.vax.com.au	na	349
www.electrolux.com.au	na	249
www.lge.com.au	na	599 (C)
www.electrolux.com.au	na	299
www.electrolux.com.au	15	199
www.kambrook.com.au	na	230
www.hooverfloorcare.com.au	19	249
www.panasonic.com.au	na	274
www.godfreys.com.au	na	399
www.hooverfloorcare.com.au	na	279

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:
- Dirt removal from carpet: 45%
- Ease of use: 30%
- Scratch test: 15%
- Corners and edges cleaning: 10%

Features See *What to look for*, left, for more on features in the table.

Measured power Higher power doesn't guarantee better cleaning performance, as the table shows.

Price Recommended retail, as of May 2008.

TABLE NOTES

** The second number shows the score when using the additional turbo brush.*
*** The cost is for five bags. Non-brand bags are available for Miele, Electrolux and Hoover but not Bosch.*
na Not applicable — doesn't use bags.
(A) Discontinued but may be available in some shops.
(B) For two tools only.
(C) When we bought in May 2008 the LG cost $375; $599 is the quoted current price.

HOW WE TESTED

Dirt removal To test the dirt removal performance from carpet our CHOICE tester embedded sand evenly into a section of carpet and vacuumed it with the standard cleaning head to a set pattern and speed. The sand collected was weighed and recorded as a percentage of the sand applied; this was done twice and the results were averaged. Sand was also spread into 90° corners and vacuumed to see how close to the corner each cleaner could pick up.

Scratch test The cleaner was set to the hard floor setting and run back and forth over a lacquered fibre board 50 times, then checked for scratch marks.

Ease of use The tester checked how easy each model was to manoeuvre and how easily the cleaning head moved on the carpet and under low furniture. He also assessed the difficulty of emptying and changing the dirt collector; the operation of the controls; and how easy the supplied accessories are to use and store.

Noise The tester measured the impact from the user's perspective while the cleaner was at maximum speed. Some models emit an irritating high-pitched whistle, even though they may not be any louder than others.

Shear delight

A good pair of kitchen shears needn't cost a lot — our two Best Buys cost less than $15.

nutshell

- The shears specifically for poultry weren't as good as the top multipurpose models at cutting chicken (or anything else), and most weren't as easy to use.
- One of the top scorers, the Cuisena Kitchen Scissors, cost only $10 — far less than many other shears.

Some kitchen jobs are too tough for ordinary scissors. Cutting up raw chicken needs not just power to snip through meat, gristle and bone, but also non-slip handles for when your hands get greasy. Trimming woody flower stems takes a reasonable amount of force and cutting power, not to mention sharp well-aligned blades for a clean cut. A good pair of multipurpose shears can handle these tough jobs but still neatly cut paper or herbs.

There are two main types: straight-blade multipurpose shears and poultry shears with curved blades, intended to allow easier cutting around bones and hard-to-reach places. Either is sometimes available as 'pull-apart', where the two blades separate for easy cleaning (seven of the tested models can do this).

Our test results were surprising: none of the poultry shears outperformed the best straight-blade shears at cutting chicken or indeed overall.

If you buy a good pair of kitchen shears, here's how to take care of them:

- Store them in a knife block or wrapped in a cloth or sheath, to protect the blades.
- Don't put them in a dishwasher.
- Good-quality blades can be resharpened with a steel or by a professional. >

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE			CUTTING PERFORMANCE SCORE COMPONENTS			FEATURE
Brand / model (in rank order within groups)	Overall score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Cutting performance score (%)	Cutting poultry score (%)	Cutting flower stems, paper and chives score (%)	Sharpness and durability score (%)	Pull apart
STRAIGHT-BLADE MULTIPURPOSE SHEARS							
Cuisena Kitchen Scissors 949668	84	67	91	100	90	88	
Zwilling J.A. Henckels Twin Select 41471-000	84	63	93	100	90	94	
Victorinox Super Schere 7.6363	83	73	87	80	85	94	
Messermeister Kitchen Take-Apart Scissors DN2070	81	80	81	60	80	94	✓
Wiltshire Kitchen Shears Laser Edge LASE9809	81	77	83	80	75	98	
Wüsthof Pull Apart Shears 5558	79	73	81	80	75	92	✓
Zwilling J.A. Henckels Twin Multipurpose 43967-000	79	73	82	40	83	100	
Cuisena Kitchen Shears 949667	74	77	73	80	65	86	
Zyliss Multi Purpose Shears 30374	74	87	68	60	60	86	
Messermeister Utility Take-Apart Shears DN1070	73	80	70	80	55	94	✓
Oxo Good Grips Kitchen & Herb Scissors 1072121	71	77	69	60	65	81	✓
Oxo Good Grips Kitchen Scissors 31181 (A)	71	60	76	60	70	93	
Wiltshire Kitchen Shears Resolution W1153	70	73	68	40	60	96	✓
Mundial All Purpose Take Apart 0666	64	70	62	40	60	75	✓
Victorinox 7.6375 (chrome, red handle)	62	40	71	40	65	95	
Homemaker Everyday Kitchen Shears	61	53	64	80	65	56	
POULTRY SHEARS							
Victorinox Poultry Shears 7.6343	76	70	78	60	70	100	
Fiskars Functional Form Poultry Shears 85-9975	74	57	81	80	75	94	
Victorinox Poultry Shears 7.6350 (All Stainless Steel)	55	63	52	20	45	79	✓
Mundial Poultry Shears 321-10	34	40	31	40	25	39	

FOR PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY

People with weak hands or wrists should look for these additional features:

- Large, comfortable, soft handles with grips or loops that accommodate all your fingers, so you can use your whole hand to apply force.
- A spring-loaded mechanism so the shears open by themselves.

Of the tested models, the OXO GOOD GRIPS Kitchen Scissors are the most suitable, as are the MESSERMEISTER Kitchen Take-Apart Scissors DN2070: they have large comfortable handles and a smooth action, but no spring.

What to buy

CUISENA Kitchen Scissors 949668	$10
ZWILLING J.A. HENCKELS Twin Select 41471-000	$125
VICTORINOX Super Schere 7.6363	$30
MESSERMEISTER Kitchen Take Apart Scissor DN2070	$20
WILTSHIRE Kitchen Shears Laser Edge LASE9809	$13

What to look for

THE BEST IN KITCHEN SHEARS

- **Solid construction** and well balanced, with few crevices where food can accumulate.
- **Smooth action** The shears should open and close with little effort.
- **Handles** should fit your hand comfortably; if they're too small, they'll reduce your control and force. They should be non-slip — plastic or rubber handles tend to be best for this — otherwise it can be difficult to apply force when cutting chicken bones or other tough material. If you're a left-hander, check the handles are suitable for you; in our test, all the models except the MESSERMEISTER DN1070 and the VICTORINOX 7.6350 are suitable for left-hand use.
- A **bone notch** on one blade helps grip poultry bones or flower stems for easier cutting.
- A **lock** is useful on spring-loaded models to hold the blades safely closed.
- A **tightening mechanism**, such as a bolt, can help keep the blades closely aligned.

Other features can include bottle and jar openers, a nutcracker, herb stripper and screwdriver head.
Blades should be well aligned and sharp — but don't check with your fingers. Make sure they meet cleanly as you close them. Short blades can make cutting more difficult as you can't get a long stroke.
Pull-apart shears separate into two parts for easy cleaning.

SPECIFICATIONS

Handle material	Dishwasher-safe	Left or right-handed	Contact	Price ($)
Plastic	ns	Both	www2.dksh.com	10
Stainless steel	ns	Both	www2.dksh.com	125
Plastic	ns	Both	www.oppenheimer.com.au	30
Plastic	√	Both	www.messermeister.com	20
Plastic		Both	www.mcpher.com.au	13
Plastic	√ (B)	Both	www.wusthof.com.au	65
Plastic	ns	Both	www2.dksh.com	73
Plastic / rubber	√	Both	www2.dksh.com	13
Plastic / rubber		Both	www2.dksh.com	24
Plastic	√	Right	www.messermeister.com	36
Plastic / silicone		Both	www.worldkitchen.com.au	35
Plastic / rubber	√	Both	www.worldkitchen.com.au	30
Plastic / rubber		Both	www.mcpher.com.au	20
Plastic	ns	Both	02 9482 6666	40
Metal	ns	Both	www.oppenheimer.com.au	60
Plastic		Both	www.kmart.com.au	3.29
Plastic	ns	Both	www.oppenheimer.com.au	70
Plastic / rubber	√	Both	www.fiskars.com	25
Stainless steel	ns	Right	www.oppenheimer.com.au	160
Chrome	ns	Both	02 9482 6666	80

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Cutting performance: 70%
- Ease of use: 30%

Cutting performance consists of

- Cutting poultry: 14%
- Cutting flower stems, paper and chives: 56%
- Sharpness and durability 30%

Ease of use includes comfort, grip and balance (equally weighted).
Price Recommended or average retail price, as of July 2008. Store prices vary so it pays to shop around.

TABLE NOTES

ns Not stated
(A) Discontinued, but may still be available in some shops.
(B) Dishwasher-safe but handwashing recommended.

We put poultry shears through the whole range of tests to see if they could cope with other kitchen tasks too.

Profiles

84% CUISENA Kitchen Scissors 949668

BEST BUY

PRICE $10

GOOD POINTS
- Excellent cutting performance.
- Well balanced.
- Unconditional guarantee.

BAD POINTS
- Small, hard plastic handle may be uncomfortable for some users.

83% VICTORINOX Super Schere 7.6363

PRICE $30

GOOD POINTS
- Very good cutting performance.
- Excellent for cutting paper and chives.
- Smooth action.
- Comfortable handles.
- Well balanced.

BAD POINTS
- Small grip.

81% MESSERMEISTER Kitchen Take Apart Scissor DN2070

PRICE $20

GOOD POINTS
- Very good cutting performance.
- Smooth action.
- Large comfortable grip.
- Well balanced.
- Pull-apart.
- Dishwasher safe.
- Lifetime warranty.

BAD POINTS
- Nothing to mention.

81% WILTSHIRE Kitchen Shears Laser Edge LASE9809

BEST BUY

PRICE $13

GOOD POINTS
- Very good cutting performance.
- Smooth action.
- Fairly large grip.
- Well balanced.
- Five-year warranty.

BAD POINTS
- Nothing to mention.

84% ZWILLING J.A. HENCKELS Twin Select 41471-000

PRICE $125

GOOD POINTS
- Excellent cutting performance.
- Very smooth cutting action.
- Well balanced.

BAD POINTS
- Small blade area.
- Thin metal handles may be uncomfortable for some users.
- Very expensive.

About the rest

Here's why the shears that didn't reach the *What to buy* list didn't score as highly.
- The WÜSTHOF has a small grip that some people might find uncomfortable.
- The ZWILLING J.A. HENCKELS Twin has a stiff action and it's difficult to apply force when cutting chicken.
- The CUISENA Kitchen Shears didn't cut very cleanly in some tests.
- The ZYLISS showed resistance to cutting chicken, hard stems and chives.
- The MESSERMEISTER Utility blades became misaligned cutting a stem.
- The OXO GOOD GRIPS Kitchen & Herb Scissors showed resistance to cutting, especially chicken.
- The OXO Good Grips Kitchen Scissors didn't cut accurately and the spring didn't always rebound after cutting.
- The WILTSHIRE Resolution is hard to open wide if you have small hands.
- The MUNDIAL Take Apart's short blades don't give much leverage, and showed some resistance to cutting.
- The VICTORINOX 7.6375 has a stiff action and small, uncomfortable grip.
- The HOMEMAKER has a stiff, uncomfortable action, small grips, and failed the durability test.
- Cutting chicken is awkward with the VICTORINOX Poultry Shears.
- The FISKARS aren't easy to use for tasks requiring accuracy.
- The VICTORINOX 7.6350 took enormous effort to cut through bone.
- The blades on all three samples of MUNDIAL Poultry Shears were blunt. They'd do better if sharpened, but for $80 you're entitled to expect good performance straight out of the box.

HOW WE TESTED

Cutting performance
- **Raw chicken** Our tester butterflied a chicken to assess the shears for cutting through bone and flesh cleanly, with little or no resistance.
- **Flower stems** She cut through woody stems (roses) and soft stems (gerberas), looking for clean cuts that didn't tear the stems.
- **Baking paper** She cut baking paper to fit a round cake tin to check the shears' ability to cut accurately and cleanly.
- **Chives** She cut chives to see how well the shears can cut a food item that requires precision, without the shears bruising the chives.
- **Sharpness and durability** A specialist lab measured the ability of the shears to cut a range of materials (from soft wet tissue to very tough Kevlar fabric), then put them through a durability test of 5000 opening/closing cycles, after which the cutting tests were repeated. The lab also tested the hardness of each blade.

Ease of use Our tester assessed comfort, grip and balance for different-sized hands, and checked whether the shears could be used left-handed.

Cool air wherever you want

Portable air conditioners are still ugly and noisy, but they're getting better at keeping you cool.

nutshell

▶ Good news if you're looking for a portable air conditioner: most of the models in this test performed much better than those we tested last year.

▶ You wouldn't want to move one from room to room every night, but at least you can use it without knocking a hole in the wall.

According to the ads, portable air conditioners are affordable, movable, easy to install and can even look great. To see whether these claims are just hot air or whether these air conditioners have improved since we last tested them, we bought six models with a claimed cooling capacity of about 3.5 kW, which is suitable for cooling a large bedroom or medium-sized living area.

The good news is they've improved significantly compared with the lot we tested last year. However, they're still uglier, noisier, higher-maintenance and less effective than their built-in counterparts.

You're still better off with a built-in split system — they're more energy-efficient and powerful, so can cool a room faster. However, if you're renting or looking for a portable air conditioner for the home office or holiday house, the four models in the *What to buy* list will help you keep cool.

What to think about

Portable air conditioners don't require any modification to the building and can be taken with you when you move out. They work the same way as built-in systems: sucking in warm and humid air, cooling and dehumidifying it, then blowing it back into the room. Excess heat from this heat exchange is vented through an air duct that you install through an open window — a venting kit is included so you can seal the gap around the duct to stop hot air entering.

Installation is relatively simple. You need to adjust the length of the venting kit to fit your window or sliding door opening, connect the air duct to the air conditioner at one end and to the hole in the venting kit at the other, then close the window onto the venting kit. Some models expel the condensed water through a hose in the window kit, others collect it in a tank you need to empty. The manufacturer's instructions should have all the details.

For efficient cooling, a portable air conditioner needs to be vented outside. So before you buy one, make sure:

- You have space for it near a window or sliding door.
- There's a power point close by — an extension cord means more clutter.
- The venting kit is long enough. None of the models tested was long enough for a sliding door opening, and if it can't cover the entire opening, hot air from outside will constantly enter the room and reduce the cooling effect.
- You can live with the look. The ads rarely show you the air conditioner fully installed, with the big, white exhaust hose leading into the window kit.
- You understand their concept of 'portability'. You wouldn't want to lug one of these models from room to room the way you do a fan — they're heavy, hard to manoeuvre and need a window kit in each room.

Green cooling?

Air conditioners are responsible for creating large amounts of greenhouse gas emissions — mainly at fossil-fuel-fired power plants, but also to a lesser extent from the refrigerants they use. So can an air conditioner be considered 'green'?

Most of the air conditioners on test use R-410a (KELVINATOR) or R-407c (TECOAIR, both CONVAIRs, DELONGHI Pinguino) as the refrigerant. These hydrofluorocarbon blends release greenhouse gases if there's a leak during servicing or at the end of their life. Pure hydrocarbon refrigerants have a much lower global warming potential and pose a lower environmental risk, but they're not commonly used in air conditioning. The DELONGHI Pinguino Eco uses one (propane R-290), which makes it 'greener' than the others. Its energy consumption is also markedly lower than that of most of the other models tested, but its cooling performance suffered accordingly.

Environmentally, it's better to do without an air conditioner and heatproof your home instead: plant shade trees outside windows; install roof insulation; use curtains, blinds and awnings to block out heat; seal gaps around windows and doors; use cooling fans. >

What to buy $

KELVINATOR KPK35CRA	$849
TECOAIR TAC1319C	$879
CONVAIR Supercool TRB	$799
CONVAIR Supercool FR	$999

Profiles

80% KELVINATOR KPK35CRA

PRICE $849

GOOD POINTS

- Very good cooling performance.
- Good installation aids: the window kit has foam for sealing and a grille to cover the exhaust, and there's a duct cap for wall installation.
- Easy to drain: the water tank is removable and the bottom drain plugs are secured by straps.

BAD POINTS

- The heaviest in the test and awkward to lift.
- Noisy with the fan on high.

76% TECOAIR TAC1319C

PRICE $879

GOOD POINTS

- Very good cooling performance.
- The condensed water is used in the cooling process, so there's minimal drainage required (no hose is supplied).
- Duct cap for wall installation.
- Automatic mode and sleep mode (but no information about the latter).

BAD POINTS

- Low handles make it difficult to lift.
- Back wheels make it difficult to manoeuvre into a small space.
- Noisy with the fan on high.
- The remote control has no display and is difficult to use.

75% CONVAIR SUPERCOOL TRB

PRICE $799

GOOD POINTS

- Very good cooling performance.
- Automatic mode.
- Good installation aids: the window kit includes a rubber grommet for the water drain, a wing nut to hold the extension and a grille for the exhaust.
- Well secured lower drain.

BAD POINTS

- Heavy and awkward to lift.
- Removing the filter requires a lot of force.
- Problems with the remote control: the labelling is confusing, the display is difficult to read and its compartment on top of the unit is difficult to open.
- The drain plug is positioned too close to the ground, making it difficult to fit a container underneath for drainage.

73% CONVAIR SUPERCOOL FR

PRICE $999

GOOD POINTS

- Automatic mode.
- Good installation aids: the window kit includes a rubber grommet for the water drain, a wing nut to hold the extension and a grille for the exhaust.
- Well secured lower drain.

BAD POINTS

- Heavy and awkward to lift.
- Removing the filter requires a lot of force.
- Problems with the remote control: the labelling is confusing, the display is difficult to read and its compartment on top of the unit is difficult to open.
- The drain plug is positioned too close to the ground, making it difficult to fit a container underneath for drainage.

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE							FEATURES		SPECIFICATIONS					
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Cooling score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Claimed cooling capacity (kW)	Average measured power consumption (kW)	Fan noise (on high)		Oscillating louvres	Real-time clock (on remote)	Weight (kg)	Dimensions (cm, H x W x D)	Length of power cord (m)	Max. length of duct (m)	Length of water drainage hose (m)	Max. length of [illegible] (m)
Kelvinator KPK35CRA	80	86	67	3.5	1.4	Noisier				40.7	84 x 45 x 36	2.6	1.8	0.6	1.25
Tecoair TAC1319C	76	81	63	3.2	1.6	Noisier				36.6	62 x 47 x 39	1.7	1.9	(A)	1.25
Convair Supercool TRB	75	80	62	3.5	1.3	Medium		√	√	34.8	86 x 52 x 41	1.8	2.0	2.4	1.11
Convair Supercool FR	73	78	60	4.1	1.6	Medium		√	√	39.2	86 x 53 x 40	1.9	2.1	2.4	1.11
Delonghi Pinguino Eco PAC T120	69	72	63	3.5	0.8	Quieter		√	√	38.0	95 x 50 x 42	1.9	1.2	2.9	0.97
Delonghi Pinguino PAC C100	65	67	60	2.9	0.7	Medium				28.0	78 x 46 x 37	2.0	1.3	(B)	0.97

What to look for

INSTALLATION

- **Window kit** This is usually a 10 cm-wide piece of plastic or aluminium with an elongated hole for the exhaust hose. The piece extends to about 1 m long to fit into a sash or sliding window opening, but can't be used with an outward-opening window.

OPERATION

All the air conditioners tested have:

- **A remote control.**
- **Operating modes** Cool (none has reverse-cycle heating), dehumidify (dry) or fan only (the TECOAIR has four fan speeds, the others have three). The TECOAIR, both CONVAIRs and the DELONGHI Pinguino Eco also have an automatic mode.
- **On/off timers** The DELONGHI Pinguino Eco has a sleep timer (with automatic temperature adjustment) and the TECOAIR has a sleep mode.
- **Louvres** to direct the airflow. On the DELONGHI Pinguino they're fixed; on all other models tested they're adjustable for vertical and/or horizontal airflow. Oscillating louvres enable the cool air to be directed more widely, rather than just straight ahead.

Oscillating louvres enable the cool air to be directed more widely, rather than just straight ahead.

DRAINAGE

- **Drain hose** This leads to the outside via the venting kit or into a container to catch the extracted water.
- **Water tank** A removable water tank (as on the KELVINATOR and DELONGHI Pinguino Eco) makes drainage easier.

About the rest

The two DELONGHI air conditioners use about half the energy of the others tested, and perform considerably worse for cooling. Both have a duct cap for wall installation, but their window kit has no grille.

- The DELONGHI Pinguino Eco PAC T120, the quietest in the test, has a removable water tank, automatic mode, sleep timer and sophisticated remote control. But it's heavy and awkward to lift. See also *Green cooling?*, page 57.
- The DELONGHI Pinguino PAC C100, the most lightweight and cheapest unit tested, performed worst overall. It has no drain hose outlet, so the tank needs to be emptied regularly, and a narrow opening for the filter, so removing it could spill dirt into the unit.

HOW WE TESTED

Cooling performance CHOICE tested in a 5 m x 4 m room with a 2.4 m insulated ceiling. This was surrounded by a room or 'shell', which was kept at a constant temperature and humidity. When both rooms were at a stable 27ºC and 70% relative humidity, the air conditioners were turned on full for an hour. The test was repeated at 32ºC and 70% humidity. Testers rated the air conditioners' cooling effectiveness on their measured ability to reduce the temperature in the test room and lower the humidity. They also assessed how evenly the models cooled the test room.

Ease of use Testers looked at: stability, portability, installing the window kit, removing and refitting the air filter, water drainage, controls (including remote controls) and instruction manuals.

	Price ($)
www.electrolux.com.au	849
www.teco.com.au	879
www.convair.net.au	799
www.convair net.au	999
www.delonghi.com.au	899
www.delonghi.com.au	699

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of cooling (70%) and ease of use (30%).

Claimed cooling capacity None of the portable air conditioners tested has an energy star rating; CHOICE would like to see them included in the energy rating scheme, so you can meaningfully compare models.

Average measured power consumption This is the average of both cooling tests — see *How we tested*, above.

Fan noise These results are comparative only; what you'll actually hear will depend on the environment you're in. With the fan on high, all these air conditioners will interfere with normal conversation.

Price Recommended retail, as of June 2008.

TABLE NOTES

(A) Uses the condensed water for the cooling process, so there's minimal drainage required.

(B) No water drainage hose; the tank needs to be emptied regularly.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

See these stories in CHOICE or go to choiceextra.com.au and click on the articles under 'air conditioners' in the index:

- Small reverse-cycle split systems (July 2008).
- Large reverse-cycle split systems (November 2007, and a new report coming up soon).
- Ceiling fans (September 2007).
- Under 'C' in the index there's also a cooling capacity calculator you can use to work out what size air conditioner you need.

Café-style lunches in your own home

A sandwich press creates gourmet sandwiches and 'melts', and toasts breads like Turkish and focaccia.

nutshell

- Six of the 15 tested sandwich presses scored very well for toasting, including some of the lower-priced models.
- Larger sandwich presses (to fit four slices) are generally more versatile for different types of bread — and not necessarily much more expensive.

The good old favourite sandwich maker easily turns your lunchtime sandwich into a mouthwatering snack. But to create scrumptious, café-style lunches at home with panini, Turkish bread and focaccia, you need a sandwich press.

Unlike a traditional sandwich or jaffle maker, a sandwich press doesn't seal the edges of a sandwich and cut it in the middle. Instead it presses the sandwich down and heat it. With some models the top plate can also be locked in place above the sandwich for grilling open snacks or toasting thicker breads. This design is much more versatile, allowing you to create delicious sandwiches or open melts using salami, olives, cheese and sun-dried tomatoes on crusty panini, smoked salmon, cream cheese and capers on Turkish bread, or chargrilled vegetables, pesto and bocconcini on herbed focaccia as a vegetarian alternative.

For this report, we tested nine sandwich presses, though one ended up not recommended and left out of the ratings — see *Badly scratched*, below. In addition, six previously tested presses (CHOICE, May 2006) still on the market are included in the table on page 62. The sandwich presses range in price from just under $30 to $100. Half will fit four regular-sized slices of bread, while the other half take two slices.

BADLY SCRATCHED

We retested the RUSSELL HOBBS Panini Press Reflections 10810 ($100), which outscored the rest in our previous test, as a benchmark against the new models. It's still easy to use and toasted bread and panini well, but this time its surface became noticeably scratched after a few tests toasting both bread and panini. We'd bought a new one and hadn't subjected it to any scratch test for surface durability. We think such damage is unacceptable after such a short time of use, so this time we can't recommend it. The distributor said this sandwich press now has a double coating, but since the model number hasn't changed, you won't know whether you have old or new stock.

The results

You don't have to spend a lot of money for a good sandwich press. Among the six top-performing models tested are two smaller $40 and $45 presses (the HOMEMAKER and MAXIM SP 016C) and one larger one (the KAMBROOK KSG200) for $60. They're described in the profiles, right.

Four of the presses rated poorly for toasting regular sandwiches, due to uneven browning (the two TIFFANYs, YLCOLES and MAXIM SP038).

Apart from ordinary toasted sandwiches, most also coped well with focaccia and panini snacks, except the DELONGHI, which toasted and flattened the focaccia unevenly, and the MAXIM SP016C, which had similar problems with panini.

Sandwich presses are generally easy to use and the tested models were no exception. *What to look for*, page 62, has some hints on useful features, and the table lists which models have them. >

HOW WE TESTED

Toasting performance To see how well the sandwich presses handle various types of bread, CHOICE's home economist put them through three tests.

- **Sandwich** The first test, with a cheese and tomato sandwich, established the machines' performance with basic tasks: how well regular-sized bread fits, whether the cheese melts or the tomato turns soggy. Because this test is based on Australian Standard AS 1907P-1976, we used these results for the toasting score (colour and evenness of browning) in the table on page 62.
- **Focaccia** Thicker-sliced herb focaccia filled with pesto, marinated eggplant, red capsicum, semi-dried tomatoes and bocconcini cheese.
- **Panini** Hard, crusty panini, filled with smoked salmon and cream cheese.

Both these tests show how well the sandwich presses handle trickier breads and moist fillings.

Ease of use Our home economist assessed how easy the sandwich presses are to clean, inside and out. She also looked at their versatility: are the plates large enough to hold various types of bread? How easy are they to load?

What to buy

Four-slice sandwich presses

81% BREVILLE MAXI SG820

PRICE $90

GOOD POINTS
- Very good at toasting white bread and focaccia.
- Very easy to use.
- Large plate accommodates various bread types and sizes.
- Height-adjustable top plate can be locked in place for making open melts.

BAD POINTS
- One of the slower models to heat up.
- Relatively expensive.

81% KAMBROOK KSG200

PRICE $60

GOOD POINTS
- Very good toasting score.
- Very easy to use.
- Quick to heat up.
- Large plate accommodates various bread types and sizes.

BAD POINTS
- The ribbed top plate is more difficult to clean than a flat plate, and it can't be locked in place for making open melts.

81% SUNBEAM CAFÉ PRESS 4 SLICE GR8400

PRICE $80

GOOD POINTS
- Very good toasting score.
- Very easy to use.

BAD POINTS
- The top plate can't be locked in place for making open melts.
- Relatively expensive.

Two-slice sandwich presses

80% BREVILLE SG620

PRICE $70

GOOD POINTS
- Very good at toasting white bread and panini.
- Very easy to use.
- Large plate accommodates various bread types and sizes.
- Height-adjustable top plate can be locked in place for making open melts.

BAD POINTS
- Relatively expensive.

79% HOMEMAKER CM2253SP

PRICE $30

GOOD POINTS
- Very good toasting score.
- Relatively quick to heat up.
- Reasonably cheap.

BAD POINTS
- Larger bread can stick out, if it isn't positioned properly.
- The top plate can't be locked in place for making open melts.

79% MAXIM KITCHENPRO CAFÉ STYLE SP 016C

PRICE $45

GOOD POINTS
- Very good toasting score.
- Height-adjustable top plate can be locked in place for making open melts.
- Reasonably cheap.

BAD POINTS
- Larger bread can stick out, if it isn't positioned properly.

About the rest

FOUR SLICES
- While the SUNBEAM GR8400B cost the same as the recommended four-slice SUNBEAM, it didn't score as well for toasting.
- The TIFFANY SP4, YLCOLES and MAXIM SP038 have large plates to accommodate various bread types and sizes, but all three scored poorly for toasting.

TWO SLICES
- The BELLE is one of the cheaper two-slice models tested and is easy to use. But it didn't toast bread as evenly as the three recommended models.
- The DELONGHI is a contact grill that doubles as a sandwich press. You can adjust the temperature and remove the grill plates for cleaning.
- The KAMBROOK KP500 toasted bread unevenly, and won't fully fit larger breads such as focaccia.
- The TIFFANY SP2 also scored poorly for toasting, and won't fit larger breads.

If you can lock the top plate in place at various heights, you can use the press to make open melts.

What to look for

SANDWICH PRESS ESSENTIALS

- **Size** Sandwich presses come in two sizes to fit two or four regular-sized slices of bread. Larger models are generally more versatile for different types of bread, and aren't necessarily much more expensive. Smaller presses are OK if you're short of space or only make the occasional toasted sandwich.
- **Finish** A glass top or painted surface is the easiest to keep clean; polished stainless steel is easier to keep shiny than a brushed surface.
- **Cord storage** underneath the bottom plate helps keep the benchtop tidy and the cord away from little hands.
- All the sandwich presses in the test have a **floating hinge** for height adjustment (except the DELONGHI), **non-stick plates**, **power on/off indicators**, and **element ready/heating lights** (except the DELONGHI).

Storage latch This locks the top and bottom plates together for easy carrying and vertical storage.

Top plate If you can lock it in place at various heights, you can use the press for open melts.

FOR PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY

The KAMBROOK KSG200 (four-slice) and the HOMEMAKER CM2253SP (two-slice) are the most suitable of the newly tested sandwich presses for someone with a disability. Their top plates are lightweight and easy to lift; the indicator lights on top of the press are easy to see and the different-coloured handles stand out from the body. The BREVILLE SG620 two-slice, which we tested previously, is also very easy to use.

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Toasting: 70%
- Ease of use: 30%

Features See *What to look for*, above, for an explanation.
Price Recommended retail, as of June 2008.

TABLE NOTES

 # Newly tested models.

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE				FEATURES			SPECIFICATIONS	
Brand / model (in rank order within groups)	Overall score (%)	Toasting score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Heat-up time (min:sec)	Storage latch	Lockable top plate height adjustment	Cord storage	Contact	Price ($)
FOUR SLICES									
# **Breville** Maxi SG820	81	80	83	3:20	√	√	√	www.breville.com.au	90
# **Kambrook** KSG200	81	80	83	1:50	√		√	www.kambrook.com.au	60
# **Sunbeam** Café Press 4 Slice GR8400	81	80	83	2:45	√		√	www.sunbeam.com.au	80
Sunbeam GR8400B	74	70	83	2:40	√		√	www.sunbeam.com.au	80
Tiffany SP4	53	40	83	2:30	√	√	√	www.gafcontrol.com.au	40
# **YLColes** SS YLCSP	53	40	83	2:20	√	√	√	www.coles.com.au	40
Maxim SP038	52	40	80	2:15	√	√	√	www.maximhousewares.com	60
TWO SLICES									
Breville SG620	80	80	80	2:30	√	√	√	www.breville.com.au	70
# **Homemaker** CM2253SP	79	80	75	2:05	√		√	www.kmart.com.au	30
# **Maxim** Kitchenpro Café Style SP016C	79	80	75	2:15	√	√		www.maximhousewares.com	45
Belle Stainless Steel SP2	73	70	80	2:40	√	√	√	www.saabappliances.com.au	30
# **DeLonghi** CG400	72	70	78	3:20	√			www.delonghi.com.au	79
Kambrook Compact KP500	65	60	75	2:00	√		√	www.kambrook.com.au	40
# **Tiffany** SP2	51	40	75	2:05	√	√	√	www.gafcontrol.com.au	30

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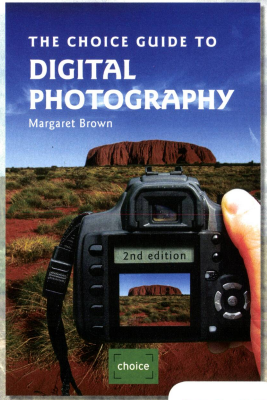
The CHOICE Guide to Digital Photography

This book covers all aspects of digital photography. Find out the answers to these common questions:

- How do I take a good photo?
- What should I buy?
- How do I edit my photos or videos?
- How do I send my photos by email?
- How do I create the perfect panorama shot?

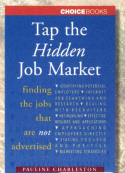


$29.95

The Australian Green Consumer Guide

Choose products for a healthier home and bank balance. Learn how to make ecologically sound consumer choices when you're shopping for food, fashion, cars or whitegoods.

$29.95



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Whether you're after your first job, a new position or a break into an entirely new field, *Tap the Hidden Job Market* puts you behind the steering wheel and en route to where the jobs really are. The majority of job opportunities are found in the 'hidden job market'. This book tells you how to uncover them.

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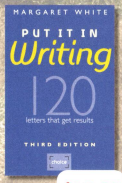

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choice.com.au/books (P&H $6 for 1–2 books, free for 3 or more)

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Nowadays there are so many product recalls we may not be able to print all of them in CHOICE. For comprehensive recall information go to the Product Recalls Australia website: www.recalls.gov.au. If you don't have web access, call the Product Safety Policy section of the ACCC on 02 6243 1262.

Companies often rent 1800 numbers for a couple of months after a recall is announced. If the number given is no longer operating, phone the manufacturer or retailer direct.

CHILD RESTRAINT ■ Xport Investments has recalled **Baby Shield Child Restraint System**, for children 9–25 kg, on sale since 23 November 2007. It has a five-point lock, six different sitting/sleeping positions and four safety belt adjustment combinations.
The problem They don't meet the requirements of the Australian standard for child restraint systems.
What to do If you've purchased one of these restraints, stop using it. Return it to the following address for a refund of the cost of the seat and postage, or send it COD through Australia Post: Xport Investments, 12 Holbeach Avenue, Tempe 2044. Please provide your name, address, email address, contact number and proof of purchase if possible. For more information email xport99@gmail.com.

TOY ■ Toys 'R' Us has recalled **Totally Me Makit&Bakit Jewellery**, sold at Toys 'R' Us between 1 July 2007 and 14 April 2008.
The problem The clasp on the metal bracelet may contain prohibited levels of lead.
What to do Remove it from the reach of children. Return it to any Toys 'R' Us store for a refund. For more information, call your local store or 1800 241 390.

TOY ■ SmartyPantz Communications has recalled **Ball Popper Projectile Toy**, one half of a pop and catch set. It comprises a red basket catcher, a blue popping section and a white ping-pong ball. It was supplied on the cover of children's magazine *DMAG*, issue 77.
The problem It doesn't meet mandatory safety requirements and could result in injury.
What to do Remove it from the reach of children and dispose of it.

HEATER ■ Tempo has recalled **Home Collection 2000 W Combination Flat and Upright Heater**, model number NSB-200J, sold at Woolworths and Safeway stores since March 2008.
The problem It may catch fire.
What to do Don't use it. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund, or for more information call 1300 886 649.

MICROWAVE OVEN ■ LG Electronics has recalled **LG microwave oven**, model numbers MS2346VR and MS2347GR, sold since September 2007, and with serial numbers starting with the numbers 708 to 802.
The problem An electrical short circuit may result in an electric shock to the user.
What to do Stop using it. Call 1800 506 154 between 9 am and 5 pm, Monday to Friday, to arrange for the oven to be taken to a service centre for a free inspection and repair. Please record the model and serial number before calling.

BICYCLE ■ Gemini Bicycle Centres have recalled the following **Mongoose Bicycle models**: 2008 Tyax Comp (red); Tyax Elite (black, blue-purple or grey); Tyax Super (silver); Otero Comp (blue); Otero Elite (green); and Otero Super (brown). The same model names existed in some earlier years and the method of distinguishing the 2008 models is twofold — the colours are different from earlier years on any given model and the cranks on the affected bicycles are prominently branded FSA. Unaffected bicycles have different cranks. The affected bikes were sold after 1 November 2007.
The problem The handlebars may break.
What to do Don't use the bike. Return it to the place of purchase to have the handlebars changed at no cost. For more information go to www.geminibicycle.com.au.

SPEAKERS ■ Australia Post has recalled **Logitech R-20 2.1 speakers**, a three-piece unit consisting of two satellite speakers, one subwoofer and an electrical adapter. The speakers plug into and play on PCs, CD players and MP3 players, and come with volume control and a headphone jack. They were advertised in the Australia Post April 'Everyday Options' catalogue, and the June 'World Famous Brands' catalogue, and have been for sale in Australia Post stores since 22 March 2008.
The problem The speakers may be faulty, and pose a fire risk.
What to do Don't use them. Return them to any Australia Post outlet for a refund, or for more information call 13 13 18.

DISTRESS FLARE ■ Bob Littler Agencies has recalled the following **marine distress flares**: Red Hand Flare, product number 222052, batch numbers 143847 (expiry date 07/2010), 145303 (expiry date 09/2010) and 147556 (expiry date 01/2011); Orange Hand Smoke Signals, product number 222056; and the following kits that contain the above products: Offshore Flare Kit, Tasmania and SA, product number 222070, Trawler Flare Kit, product number 222072; Inshore Flare Kit, product number 222074; Offshore Flare Kit (WA), product code 222075 and Inshore Flare Kit (NSW), product code 222076.
The problem The Orange Hand Smoke Signals may not comply with the Australian standard as the density and volume of smoke is inadequate, while the Red Hand Flare may not comply with the Australian standard as the flare may not be seen from the required distance. They may also be a fire hazard.
What to do Stop using them. Return them to the place of purchase for a refund, or for more information contact Paul Kessell during business hours on 07 3390 0196 or paul.kessell@bla.com.au.

UHF CB RADIO ■ Standard Communications has recalled **GME 5 Watt UHF CB radio**, model number TX6100, sold between April 2008 and June 2008. It carries a GME logo and the TX6100 model number on the front panel.
The problem There's a risk of fire when the battery pack is recharging.
What to do Return the battery for a replacement, or alternatively return the whole radio for a refund.

LAMP ■ IKEA has recalled **IKEA Femton clamp goose-neck lamp**, article number 00067321, sold in IKEA stores in NSW, Queensland and Victoria since 2005.
The problem If the lamp isn't properly clamped, or if the bulb is positioned too close to a flammable surface or material, there's a risk of overheating or fire.
What to do Don't use it. Return it to any IKEA store for a refund.

DIVING EQUIPMENT ■ Aquanaut has recalled **Apeks Regulators**, models TX, ATX, XTX, second stages only, sold before July 2008.
The problem Some may be incorrectly assembled.
What to do Don't use them. Return them to your nearest Apeks dealer for an inspection.

SANDING PAD ■ Techtronic Industries has recalled **Ryobi Sanding/Polishing Accessory Pad**, to suit model EAG1518GSP 180 mm 1500 watt Grinder/Sander/Polisher kit, product number 48922104082. The serial numbers affected are:
0720 002268–0720 002767; 0720 002768–0720 004407; 0724 004908–0724 005407; 0728 005408–0728 006007; 0733 006008–0733 006507; 0735 007008–0735 007855; 0736 007856–0736 008685; 0741 008686–0741 009367; 0746 009368–0746 009867; 0746 009868–0746 010867; 0752 010868–0752 012267; 0803 000001–0803 000500.
It was sold in various outlets since 1 May 2007. The recalled pads don't have a + sign before and after the wording "Wear Safety Goggles".
The problem The rubber pad could come apart if the sanding/polishing pad is run at excessive speeds, possibly causing injury.
What to do Stop using it. Call 1300 361 505 to arrange for a replacement.

+ CONSUMER RIGHTS

International treaty threatens consumer rights

Those behind the proposed treaty seem to be using it as a backdoor means of limiting consumer rights to access copyrighted media.

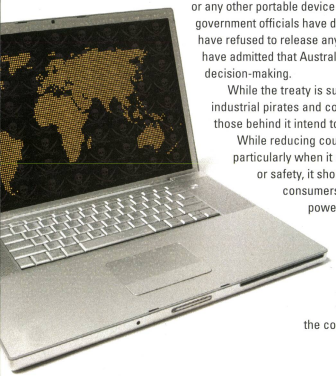
Behind closed doors, countries such as the US, France and Japan have been negotiating a new international Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA). The name suggests the treaty will apply to things such as illegal counterfeiting of brand-name accessories and clothing. But in fact, those behind it appear to be using it as a backdoor means of limiting ordinary consumer rights to access and use copyrighted media.

You can bet that Australia, while having had little input into the treaty negotiations, will be pressured to sign up to it.

The treaty negotiations are being conducted in secrecy outside normal world intellectual property forums. What little information is available suggests that possible requirements include:

- Requiring internet providers to monitor users and disconnect possible infringers without independent evidence of wrongdoing.
- Increasing penalties and criminal sentences for infringers that are ridiculously out of proportion to the alleged wrongdoing.
- Applying criminal penalties to ordinary consumers.

Leaked documents suggest customs officers could be made into copyright police, with the right to search your bags, laptop or any other portable device for infringing material. While government officials have denied this possibility, they have refused to release any text of the draft treaty and have admitted that Australia isn't at the core of the decision-making.



While the treaty is supposedly designed to target industrial pirates and counterfeiters, CHOICE thinks those behind it intend to target ordinary consumers. While reducing counterfeiting is important, particularly when it endangers consumer health or safety, it shouldn't threaten the rights of consumers or give unwarranted power to industry.

The Australian Government shouldn't sign up to the ACTA treaty if it harms consumers or restricts Australia's future ability to protect the interests of the community. ■

+ BANK FEES

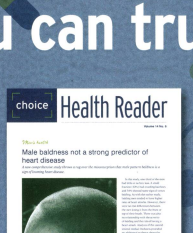
Fair Fees campaign update

CHOICE's campaign against unfair bank penalty fees is continuing to chalk up victories:

- From August this year, Westpac no longer charges penalty fees on its Basic bank account. This account is available to pensioners and other welfare recipients. Westpac joins the National Australia Bank in offering concession accounts with no penalty fees. St George Bank charges $8 and the ANZ $10, while Commonwealth Bank charges much higher fees of $30–$35 on its concession account.
- The Credit Union of Australia also recently changed its fee structure, reducing its direct debit and cheque dishonour fees. In a great move for consumers, CUA reduced its outward direct debit dishonour fee from $20 to just $7.50.

We're keeping the pressure on other banks and credit unions to reduce their fees. In addition, we're raising the issue in our submission to the Federal Parliament inquiry into competition in banking. For more information about the campaign go to www.fairfees.com.au. ■

Health information you can trust



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* Indicates an update of a previous report, additions or corrections to reports, small follow-up items, letters or recalls.

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The prize for best entry goes to 12-year-old M Mills for the food-preserving Tupperware containers. Thanks also to W Le Get, C Ferrington, E Brown, W Sauer, J Smyth, E Walker and B Winchcombe for their contributions to this month's *Hard Word*.

If you have any examples you think deserve to be on this page, send them to The Hard Word, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204. Please don't email us your entries — we need the originals.

Long and longer

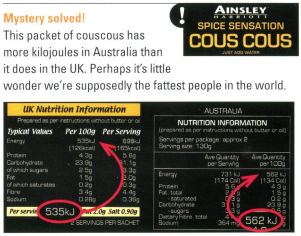
Wendy Le Get marvelled at the long shelf life of this sandwich, which she bought in June 2008.

Maybe the sandwich was stored in Tupperware?

Tupperware has been keeping your food fresh for more than 50 years. Now with FridgeSmart, you can keep your fruits and vegetables fresher longer!

Mystery solved!

This packet of couscous has more kilojoules in Australia than it does in the UK. Perhaps it's little wonder we're supposedly the fattest people in the world.



Before turning the pan over, and after turning it over…

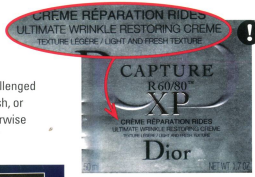
Somehow we're not convinced by this ad — we'll never know what the bottom of the pan looked like 'before' these Grease-Be-Gone tablets allegedly set to work.

That's just nuts!

Stating the obvious

For whose protection is this warning? The cerebrally challenged driver who might have a crash, or the company that could otherwise be sued for others' stupidity?

WARNING: Not to be used whilst vehicle is in motion.
Correctly installed sunshade
WARNING: Not to be used whilst vehicle is in motion.
SCA



Lost in translation?

This product apparently promises to restore your wrinkles — just in case you want them back.

Globalisation in our fridges

Overlooking for a moment the misconception that Ireland is part of Britain, can it really be said that these British Irish sausages are 'uniquely Australian'?